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Subscription Department
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VOL. 1, NO. 3

MANHUNT

MARCH, 1953

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MANHUNT • Volume 1, Number 3, March, 1953. Single copies 35 cents. Subscriptions, \$4.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$5.00 (in U. S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc. (an affiliate of St. John Publishing Company), 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, New York. Telephone MU 7-6623. Application for second class entry is pending at the Post Office, New York, New York. The entire contents of this issue are copyrighted 1953 by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc. (an affiliate of St. John Publishing Company), under the International Copyright Convention. All rights reserved under Inter-American Copyright Convention. Title registered U. S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use, without express permission, of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts and drawings if return is desired, but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited materials. Manuscripts and art work should be sent to Manhunt, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, New York. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in the U. S. A.

The Sleeper Caper

A NOVELETTE



BY RICHARD S. PRATHER

Shell Scott went to Mexico City to investigate a racing fix — but he found himself getting ready to kill a killer.

YOU take a plane from the States and head south; a few hours later and up more than seven thousand feet, where the air is thin and clear, you land at Mexico City and take a cab to the Hipódromo de las Américas where the horses run sideways, backwards, and occasionally around the seven-furlong track, and you go out to the paddock area after the fourth race.

You see a big, young, husky, unhandsome character with a Mexico City tan, short, prematurely white hair sticking up in the air like the end of a clipped whiskbroom, and

his arms around the waists of two lovely young gals who look like Latin screen stars, and you say, "Geez, look at the slob with the two tomatoes."

That's me. I am the slob with the two tomatoes, and the hell with you.

Five days ago I'd left Los Angeles and my one-man agency, "Sheldon Scott, Investigations," and flown to Mexico for my client, Cookie Martini, an L.A. bookmaker. A big one. You may sneer at the thought of my taking a bookie for a client. Okay, sneer. As far as I'm concerned, people are going to gamble whether

there are bookies or not. If they can't bet on the nags, they'll bet on the number of warts on some guy's nose. Cookie Martini was at least an honest bookie, and his money was clean. In the last year or so he'd started booking bets on tracks outside the States: France, South America — and Mexico City. He and some other books taking Mexico City bets had recently been clipped for nearly three hundred thousand dollars. Cookie figured that too many longshots were coming in, too many sleepers, and he suspected a fix. So he'd hired me to find out if anything smelled here at the Hipódromo. It smelled. And it was starting to look as if a guy could get killed just sniffing.

"I wonder where Pete is?" Vera asked.

Vera was the tomato on my left, and I had to reach way down to put my arm around her. She was only five feet tall, but that still made her a head taller than Pete. Pedro Ramirez, her husband, was one of the season's leading riders at the Hipódromo, even though he was still an apprentice.

"He'll be here in a minute, Vera," I said.

He was a few minutes late, and we were to meet him here and wish him luck. Pete was riding Jetboy, the solid favorite in the fifth race coming up, and it was a big race for him. He'd started the day with a total of thirty-eight wins behind him and won the second race. One more

winner and he'd lose his "bug," his apprentice's two-kilo weight allowance, and become a full-fledged jockey. It was important in another way, too. He was supposed to throw the race.

Elena Angel squeezed my right arm. "Here he comes, Shell."

For a moment, I just enjoyed the squeeze. This Elena was married to nobody and that pleased me hugely. She was tall, blackhaired, with creamy skin and what I thought of simply as "Mexican" eyes. Dark eyes, soft, big, shadowed eyes with both the question and the answer in them. And her body could best be described with words that are pornographic.

I gave Elena a squeeze to make us even — actually, that particular squeeze put me way ahead — and looked to my left. I could see Pete walking toward us fast from the Jockey's Room, practically sprinting. I always got a kick out of him when he was in a hurry — unless he was on a horse. He was only about four feet tall, wiry, a man of twenty-four, but he still looked like a kid. A tough kid. A kid who'd haul off and slug you in the knee if you cracked wrong.

When he got close, I said, "Hi, champ. I'm sinking the roll this trip."

He grinned, jaws working while he flashed white teeth. Pete was nervous, high-strung, like a thoroughbred, and he constantly chewed little candy-coated Chiclets.

"Si," he said. "You sink it all, Shell. This one is a shoo-in. This one, I lose the bug for sure."

He spit out his gum and fished in his pocket for the pack, shook two white Chiclets out into his small palm. "*Dio*, they go fast," he said in surprise. "I thought I had a full box." He shrugged. "Gum?" He tossed one cube into his mouth and held out his hand.

The girls didn't chew. I took the gum, started to pop it into my mouth, and stopped when I saw Pete's face. I'd just noticed that his lips were puffed and the side of his jaw was swollen.

"What happened, Pete?" I asked. "You kiss a horse?"

He stopped grinning. "I kiss a fist. Jimmy Rath's." He saw the hot anger boil up in me at mention of the name, and he added, "I fix him. Don't worry. Sometime I fix him with a baseball bat. Anyway, I fix him good when I boot Jetboy in."

I looked toward the oval walking ring. Jimmy Rath was there with another guy about my size. I took a step toward them but Elena and Vera both hung onto my arms and Pete said, "Relax, Shell. So what do we prove this way? When I boot this one home, I'm through for the day. I come up to your table, and you can stand right behind me when I spit in his eyes. I don't need no bodyguard. Anyway, Rath's just Hammond's stooge. Hammond, he's back of it."

I knew what Pete meant. We both knew it, and everybody knew it, but

proving it was another thing. When Cookie Martini sent me down here he'd given me a letter to Pete, and Cookie told me he'd checked and there wasn't a more honest jock in the business than Pete Ramirez. I'd watched Pete race Sunday, and met him afterwards. I told him what I was here for, laid it on the line. Pete was, if anything, more interested in cleaning up any mess here than I was. Like a lot of Mexican kids born in the poor outlying states, he'd had it tough as a kid. Now he was a jockey starting to make the grade and dreaming the big dream: a fine house, clothes — and a hundred pairs of shoes. Racing was his job, the center of his dream. Pete wanted it to be clean — and let the best man win.

And, Pete said, jocks were throwing races. He couldn't prove it but he knew it was happening because he could ride alongside the other jocks and see them pulling leather, holding their mounts back. Sometimes owners gave their jocks instructions that their horse wasn't to finish in the money, but Pete said this other thing was different; it happened too often, to the wrong horses. And Pete had heard soft-talk, rumors of fixes and payoffs and threats against jocks who weren't supposed to win. Almost always it was the favorite supposed to lose, and a longshot that actually won.

Pete had nosed around, questioned the other jocks; I'd done a pile of routine legwork in Mexico

City, checking the books I could find, talking to horseplayers, trying to get a lead to who was putting the fixes in. The picture was pretty conclusive: at the top was a fat guy named Arthur Hammond whom everybody seemed to be scared of. He was from the States, had once been a trainer, but was ruled off the tracks for life because of shady practices. His retinue was a little mug named Jimmy Rath, and usually a couple of heavies. Hammond occupied the same table at the track every day. He'd been in a few scraps with the local cops, but never went to jail, mainly because he was "like that" with a Mexican biggie named Valdez. Valdez wasn't a *politico*, but he had almost as much behind-the-scenes power as the President. And Valdez always helped his pals. Always.

Jimmy Rath had got Pete alone yesterday and told him to lose the fifth race today, Thursday, for ten thousand pesos. Pete laughed at him and walked away, reporting the bribe offer to the Racing Commission and later to me. There were no witnesses or corroboration, and consequently no proof. Apparently Rath had just now made his offer again, a little differently.

I asked Pete, "When did this happen? Anybody see it?"

"No, no, of course not. He send me over to the tack room after the fourth, and boost the ante to fifteen thousand. Then he say I either lose or get taken care of. I told him to go

— well, you know. That's when he hit me, and when I wake up, he's gone."

Elena said angrily, "They ought to do something about that Rath."

"Yeah." As far as I was concerned, the "they" was rapidly becoming me. My fingers were sticky; I realized I still held the Chiclet in my sweaty hand, and the sugary coating was getting slippery. I stuck the gum in my coat pocket and looked toward the walking ring. Rath wasn't there. I knew where he probably was; with Hammond and two other bruisers upstairs.

In a few minutes, Pete left to weigh in, and the three of us went back upstairs to our table high in the stands overlooking the beautiful oval track bordered by trees, green lawn cool and colorful inside it. A hundred conversations swelled around us, and a constant stream of men and women wound in and out of the tables. It was pleasant and lovely, but mainly I was looking at four men seated a few tables away from us.

Jimmy Rath was there with two bruisers — and Hammond, a thick bulge of fat puffing over his collar. Rath sitting at the same table was proof enough that Hammond was the boy fixing the races — as far as I was concerned. The Racing Commission and the cops felt differently. And it would take more than hunches to get Hammond because of his pal Valdez.

Suddenly, I stopped paying any

attention to Hammond. Something was moving on my leg. Slowly, suggestively. Elena and I sat close together facing the track, and her hand was resting just above my knee, caressing me gently.

I turned and looked at her face close to mine, looked at the rest of her. She was wearing a gray skirt and a pink sweater that covered her up completely, but was still very nearly indecent. A shroud on that body would have looked indecent.

"*Cuidadito!*" I said. "Be careful, baby. Two more seconds and another inch, and I'll go screeching around the track with the horses."

She smiled, wiggled long lashes. My spine wiggled. "I will be careless," she said. "You do not look enough at me." Her hand moved. I moved. I had never been alone with Elena since Pete introduced us, but I knew if I ever was, there'd be plenty happening.

I put my hand over hers and said, "Honey, you want me to fall down frothing?"

"Yes," she said. Then: "What is frothing?"

The question was gone from her eyes now; only the answer was there. I started to tell her a terrible lie about what frothing meant, but right then the high, fast notes of the bugle sounded, and the announcer said the horses were coming onto the track for the *quinta carrera*, the fifth race.

Elena took her hand away, and I put it back, and then the horses were

passing in front of us. I saw Pete in bright red-and-white silks up on Jetboy, a black five-year-old gelding with clean, graceful lines. I expected Pete to look up and nod or wave, but he went right on past, head slightly bent.

I realized I didn't have a bet down on Jetboy, so I went down to the mutual windows and bought two fifty-peso win tickets. Jetboy was one to two, the odds-on favorite. By the time I'd reached the table again, the race had already started. I sat down beside Elena, stuck the two tickets into my pocket and my fingers hit the sticky gum. I pulled it out, started to throw it away. Then I noticed that the white coating had melted and there was what appeared to be a hole pushed into the gum. I squinted at it, spread the thing with my fingernails. There was a hole, all right, with a white powdery stuff inside it. It hit me all at once, and I jumped to my feet just as the crowd did, except they were yelling about the race.

The horses were charging down the far side of the track, opposite the stands, and Jetboy trailed the fifth-place horse by four lengths. Usually Pete stayed closer than that, but he wasn't riding as smoothly as he usually did. I knew damn well why, and my heart jumped up into my mouth as he started his move on the last turn. The crowd was jumping up and down as Jetboy reached the fourth spot close behind the bunched leaders. I watched Pete

slumped over the saddle, riding sloppily, not like a kid with thirty-nine winners behind him — and then he tried to go through on the inside, and I bunched my hands into tight fists and almost squeezed my eyes shut. He couldn't make it, there wasn't room and I knew he couldn't make it. I was yelling at the top of my lungs as I saw Jetboy practically brushing the hard, sharp wooden rail. The whip came down again, and it all happened in a second.

Jetboy leaped forward, running up on the heels of the horse ahead, stumbled, fell. I saw Pete hurtle through the air like a bundle of rags, slam into the rail — and in the sudden shocked silence of the crowd I thought I could hear him hit. He fell to the dirt track, rolled and lay still as the horse sprinted down toward the finish line. Jetboy struggled up and galloped away.

I heard Vera's piercing scream, and then, intuitively, I looked toward Hammond's table. He was watching the finish of the race, more interested in that than Pete's crumpled body.

I snapped out of it, whirled and ran down the steps, sprinting toward the track. By the time I reached the rail, the huddle of doctors and officials cleared away, and Pete was lying there with a white sheet over his body and head, and there was nothing else I could do. Except break Hammond in two. Clear down the middle. Like a goddamn match-

stick that didn't have a chance.

I ran back up the steps, the fury hot in me now, my hands itching. I saw Vera lying in a faint at our table, Elena bending over her. I didn't stop. I walked straight to Hammond's table.

None of the men looked up until I stopped alongside them. Hammond was on my right, facing the track. Opposite me and on my left were the two musclemen, and Rath sat with his back to me. I could feel the muscles around my mouth twitching, jerking.

I put my palms flat down on the table, and Hammond glanced up, fat pink face gleaming slightly with perspiration, thick lips dry. "Yeah?" he asked.

"Don't 'yeah' me, you fat bastard," I shouted.

There was a slight movement behind me. I reached out without turning, slapping Rath backhanded, knocking him out of his chair. His head cracked against the iron rail, and he let out a yell and started to jump up.

"Wait a minute," Hammond said. "Wait a minute. What's this all about?"

"You don't know, huh, Hammond? You haven't the faintest idea!"

An empty glass in front of Hammond held several colored tickets. His program was open in front of him, Number 2 circled — a horse named Ladkin. I looked at the tote board where the winning numbers

were already lighted under the "Official" sign: 2, 3, 6, 1. Ladkin was the winner at fourteen to one. Another sleeper. Hammond didn't stop me as I picked up the glass and dumped out his tickets.

There were twenty fifty-peso win tickets on Number 3, and ten win tickets on Number 4. Nothing on the winner. For a few seconds it puzzled me, but only for a few seconds. Those heavy bets were enough to push the odds on Ladkin up to fourteen to one.

"Hammond," I said, "you usually bet two horses to win in the same race? A question, fat boy."

His pink face grew pinker and for the first time he got nasty. He leaned toward me, his face angry. "Give a listen, Scott. I heard all I care to hear right now. I know you been poking your ugly nose in the wrong holes, you hear me? You keep it up, you never will get Stateside."

"It isn't just a fixed race now, fat boy. It's murder."

"Murder, my backside! The kid made a bad ride, that's all. Everybody makes a bad ride every now . . ."

I didn't wait for more. Half a dozen partly-filled plates of food were on the table, some highballs. I lifted the edge of the table and the whole goddamn mess against Hammond's belly. He tried to scoot back, but the plates and glasses slid off the table as it hit him, and food and liquor smeared his tan suit. The big goon on my left reached for me,

but I was more concerned about Rath. His right hand jerked under his coat and before he had a chance to get whatever he was reaching for, I hit him with the side of my hand, hard, on his right shoulder. He yelled like a madman, his fingers spreading wide in pain, and then Hammond shouted, "Hold it! Rath! Kelly! Knock it off. Quick."

I'd thought we were going to have a real knockdown brawl right there, but Hammond apparently didn't want it that way. Rath hesitated, then obediently sat down. Kelly followed suit.

Hammond glared at me, eyes narrowed to angry slits. He brushed at the slop in his lap and said, "You'll regret this, Scott. You're gonna be goddamn sorry for this, you hear me?" He looked around the table and jerked his head, then got ponderously to his feet. The four of them left. Nothing else happened. It surprised me, but I didn't worry about it. I went back to my own table.

A half hour later, after Vera had dazedly spoken with a track doctor in the emergency clinic and looked once more at Pete, we left. She didn't break down till we reached Pete's car. As we drove away she lay flat on the back seat, fingers clutching at the cushions and her body shaking with sobs. Vera didn't want to go home, so we took her to her mother's house where she'd be with her family. Then Elena and I flagged a *libre*, one of the taxis, drove

to her apartment in Lomas Colony, and I took her to her door.

Before I left, she said, "Shell, you must be careful. It is very bad, I know, but go with care. Perhaps . . . another time we can be happier together."

"Sure, Elena. I'll keep in touch."

She moved close to me, kissed me gently, lightly on the mouth, then went inside. In the cab again I told the driver to head toward the Prado. There were a lot of things I wanted to do, but first I was going to get my gun and strap it on. I knew I was going to get Hammond and Rath, one way or another, but I didn't know how. Hammond had a lot of protection, power on his side, and you can't convict a man for murder — or even fixing races — because he buys tickets on losing horses. I was still trying to figure a way to get Hammond when the cab driver yelled, "*Madre Diol!*" and grabbed for the wheel as if it were a life preserver. A big Packard cut close to our fender, ramming its nose ahead of the cab. The cabbie jerked the wheel all the way over to his right, jammed on the brakes so suddenly that I almost flew into the front seat. The cab skidded along the road, almost slamming into the Packard, and then shuddered to a stop.

We were on the Reforma, far from town still, and in a wooded section. Trees grew at the right of the road and there was little traffic here. One of Hammond's bruisers was jumping from the side door of the Packard

and starting back toward us, a gun in his fist. There were a couple other guys behind him.

I didn't wait to identify them. I threw the cab's door open and leaped out, started to run into the trees, but a gun cracked and I heard the bullet whistle by me. The guy yelled something at me from no more than ten feet away. I'd had it; there wasn't a chance I could get into the trees before a slug hit me. I stopped.

I heard one footstep as I started to turn, but I never made it around. Probably it was a gun butt, but whatever it was, it was solid, and it landed on my skull. They were dragging me when I came to and when I tried to move they stopped and dropped me. Somebody told me to get up, and in a minute I made it. We were deeper in the trees, and my company was Kelly, the other strong arm man, and Rath. Rath stood in front of me while the other two grabbed my arms and slammed my back against a tree, pulling my arms behind me around the tree trunk. And then Rath started in on me.

He was methodical about it, but it seemed to give him a sadistic pleasure. First he looked up at me from his approximate five-nine and said, "You sure made a fool of yourself today, Scott. You sure made the boss mad. We oughta plug you, but too many people saw that beef. We're gonna teach you to lay off us, though." He grinned. "After this,

we figure you'll get a plane back to the States."

He waited till he'd told me all that, then he hit me. He hit me in the stomach, but I was braced for the blow and Rath wasn't an especially powerful man, anyway. The first time he hit me it didn't hurt so much; but along about the tenth time in the same spot it was getting bad. Once, while I still had the strength, I lifted one foot and tried to kick him in what is politely called the groin, but he got out of the way. Then he took a gun from one of the guys holding me, and slammed it along my jaw twice. My legs suddenly weren't strong enough to support me, and I sagged lower, my arms bending up behind me till it felt as if they'd pop out of their sockets.

Rath's face filmed with perspiration and a little saliva drooled from the corner of his mouth. He kept grinning all the time, enjoying himself. He'd hit me and the air would gush out of my mouth; everything swam in front of me and finally Rath was just a blur of movement that meant pain.

I realized the blows had stopped. A hand ripped my shirt open and I tried to lift my head. Rath slapped me several times then said, "Look, Scott."

My eyes focused slowly on the knife in his hand. I saw it move back and forth, then the point pressed against my chest. "See how easy to kill you?" Rath said. His voice was

taut and excited, like that of a man in bed with a woman. "See?" he said. He pushed on the knife a little and I felt the point bite into my chest, slice through the skin and flesh.

I almost yelled aloud, tried to press back against the tree, suck in my chest and get away from that blade, and Rath laughed, pulled the knife away and held it before my eyes, let me see the red-stained tip. "So get out of Mexico, Scott. Or next time I push this thing all the way in."

He ran the honed edge down the front of my chest, cutting the skin, not deep but painfully. Then he stepped back. The men behind me let go of my arms and I fell forward on my face, unable to stand. My cheek pressed against the dirt and I saw Rath's pointed shoe leave the ground and felt it dig into my side, then there was a blow on my head again and welcome blackness swept over me.

I must have lain there unconscious for quite a while because it was nearly dark when I came out of it. When I tried to move I gasped as pain leaped through my stomach and chest. I bit my lip, grunting, as I got slowly to my feet and started trying to find the road. I could move only a few feet before I had to stop and rest. Finally I reached the Reforma and got a *libre* to stop.

"Get me to a doctor," I told him.

Doctor Dominguez pressed the last wide strip of adhesive tape

against my chest and said, "There. You don't seem to have internal injuries, but we'd better get you to the hospital."

"I told you I haven't got time for that." My brain was alert enough now; I simply hurt like hell. "Just so I'm not bleeding inside, doc, and nothing's busted."

"At least you should go to bed and stay there."

I couldn't explain to him that there wasn't room in my mind for thinking about hospitals or beds. The fat face of Hammond and the thin features of Rath, and the white, dead face of Pete Ramirez took up all the room there was in my mind. I just wasn't able to think about anything else even if I'd wanted to. And I didn't want to.

Before he'd started working on me I'd given Doctor Dominguez the cube of gum still in my pocket, the Chiclet, and told him what I suspected. Half an hour after he finished bandaging me he had the other answer.

"Yes, Mr. Scott," he said, "it was drugged. Crude, too; somebody merely hollowed out a small space inside the gum and filled it with the powder —"

"Would it kill a man?"

He frowned. "It might. Hard to say. It would at least make him sluggish, drowsy. Why? Where did you get this?"

"Arthur Hammond gave it to a jockey who was killed today."

He got slightly green. "Ah — no,

you must be mistaken, Mr. Hammond is a well thought of man." It was obvious the name Hammond frightened him. He said, less warmly, professional now, "That is all I can do for you."

It was also obvious he wanted to get rid of me. I paid him, asked him to call me a cab, and left.

I stood outside the Rio Rosa, a nightclub near Insurgentes, pain constant in my chest and stomach. I'd got a morphine surette from the doctor, but it was in my pocket; I might need it more later than I did right now. From the doc's I'd gone to the Prado and picked up my gun, then I had started hunting for any one of the four men I was after. But now, three hours later, this was the only lead I had. I'd checked the phone book: no Hammond. A man with as many enemies as Hammond undoubtedly had doesn't advertise his address. I'd checked every crumb I knew in Mexico City, and plenty I didn't know. His address was a complete mystery. Almost all I'd learned was that a lot of people were afraid of Hammond and his thugs — and of Hammond's pal, Valdez. But I learned that a couple of months ago Jimmy Rath had paid the rent on an apartment for a girl named Chatita, who was now in the show here at Rio Rosa — and apparently didn't like Rath any more. I went inside.

For fifty pesos the headwaiter let me knock on the door of Chatita's dressing room. When she opened the door, her eyes widened with surprise.

I guess I didn't look very handsome, with my jaw swollen and a cut in the flesh over my cheekbone.

I said, "May I talk to you for a minute?"

She looked at my bruised face, frowning. "I am sorry. I must get dressed."

Now that I took a look at her, she was right. She had on a silk wrapper thin enough so that the points of her full breasts showed through it. She started to shut the door and I took a chance. "It's about Jimmy Rath."

I got more than I bargained for. "Jimmy!" she said venomously. She opened the door wide, looked at my face again, "Did he do this to you?" I nodded and she said, "Come in."

She shut the door behind me, locked it, then turned to face me. "Sit down," she said, pointing toward a wooden chair. "You . . . do not like Jimmy?"

"I hate him," I said. "I want to find him and tell him so."

She smiled. It wasn't a very nice smile. "I hope you find him," she said. "I hope you beat him to death."

This Chatita was tall, close to six feet in her high heels, and she would have towered above Rath. He was shaping up as a queer one. Chatita had the sensual, smooth-skinned face found on many of the lovely Mexican women, with large dark eyes and a mass of black hair. Her face had a hot beauty that went with her full-curved body.

"Where can I find him?" I asked.

"I wish I knew. How do you know I once knew him?"

"I heard you were friendly. Not any more, huh?"

She walked toward me, stood in front of the chair I sat in. "I am an *exotica*," she said. "A dancer." She meant, I figured, that she did a strip act. She went on, "My body, it assures me a living, a job."

I didn't know what she was getting at, but I nodded.

"My body," she said, "it is good. It is to be proud of." She had been holding the thin robe around her; now she parted it, slid it down from her shoulders as she faced me.

She wore brief step-ins beneath it, nothing else. And she did have a lovely body, full and voluptuously curving. Her breasts were large, firm, erect. I didn't know why she had so suddenly pulled the robe from her shoulders, but soon I understood.

Her flat stomach was a criss-cross of scratches where someone had played there with a sharp knife. "You see," she said. "That is from Jimmy. I hope you find him." She bit her lip. "My body he has made ugly. Ugly!" She pulled the robe back over her shoulders.

She sat in a chair before the dressing table and we talked for a few minutes. When she'd known Rath, he had lived in Arthur Hammond's house — but she didn't know where the house was. It seemed no one knew where the fat bastard lived.

Except for that she couldn't help me, though she gave me a better picture of Rath himself.

"He is evil," she said, "insanely evil. He bought me expensive things, but I could not stay. I was with him one month. The cuts, they are from the knife he carries always." She hesitated, then went on, "Even in bed. He would hold it here—" she pointed to her throat — "when he . . . at the moment when . . ." She didn't finish it, but I knew what she meant. After a pause she continued, as if she wanted to share what she knew with somebody else, "He wanted me to hurt him. He liked to hurt and be hurt. Twice he gave to me the knife, asking that I hurt him with it. Carefully, he would say, carefully. But I could not do it and he would become angry, frightening. Then, one night, he did this to me." She touched her stomach.

She was quiet for a minute. I had already told her that if I found Rath I was going to break several of his bones, and she said, "If you do find him, remind him of this. Will you, for me?" Her fingers moved slowly over her stomach beneath her silk robe again. "It would help me," she said, "because there is inside me much hate for him."

"I'll remind him, Chatita. If there's time."

I started to get up normally, forgetting my bruises, and flopped back into the chair. The next try I made it moving slowly. Chatita

stepped to me and took my arm, her face softening for the first time. "I did not know you were hurt so. You hate him as much as I, no?"

"Maybe more, honey." Her robe had fallen open, baring her breasts. I put my hands on her shoulders, caressed her gently and said, "You probably make the cuts worse in your mind than they really are, Chatita. To a man, they mean nothing. Believe me. You're a beautiful and desirable woman, honey."

I could hear her breathing quicken as I continued to touch her. Her tongue moved over her lower lip. "Thank you," she said. "It is good of you, but it is not true."

"It is true."

Under different circumstances, I don't think I'd have got out of there before morning. But I left. Before she closed the door she smiled at me and said, "Thank you. Perhaps . . . perhaps it is true."

I grinned, said, "You damn bet it is," and staggered out of the place.

At two in the morning I gave up and went back to my room at the del Prado. I hadn't learned anything except what Chatita had told me, and by two o'clock I felt like a walking hamburger. I went to bed.

Getting up in the morning and getting dressed was a solid half hour of agony. It had been bad enough before I slept, but now my muscles had stiffened and every movement was torture. I was two-hundred-plus pounds of pain — and hate. But the hate was stronger than the pain.

I walked around the room for another half hour working my arms, bending, stretching gingerly, until I'd got some of the stiffness out of my body. Then I had breakfast and started hunting again. I knew if everything else failed I could spot the men I wanted at the track, but there were no more races until Saturday. I checked the phone books again — no Hammond listed.

At five o'clock in the afternoon I came out of a bar on Bucareli. I'd heard it was a hangout for Kelly, and I'd hoped to get some information. All I got was blank stares. But I found Kelly — and Rath.

When I came out, they were waiting for me in the big Packard, a custom job with a low two-digit license plate which shouted that this was an important car and to keep out of its way. Kelly was behind the wheel and Rath stood outside, leaning against the door. When he saw me, he walked over to me.

The street was crowded, but the gripe and fury and hate boiled up inside me when I saw him and I reached for him.

He said sharply, "Hold it. You want the girls hurt?"

That stopped me. "What do you mean, you little pile of —"

"Watch it," he said. I didn't like the casual, confident way he was talking. He knew I could bend him till he broke, but he said, "We told you to beat it, Scott. You got no sense at all. Now listen. There's a plane out at seven. You be on it.

You don't want nothing to happen to those girls, do you?"

"What girls?"

"Vera. And Elena Angel. You kind of like that Elena's pretty face — and things. Don't you, Scott? She's a real hot looking tamale. Be a shame if something happened to her. It will, Scott, unless you get lost fast."

I wanted to get my hands on this guy so bad it was hard for me to think, but that penetrated. When it did, I started cooling down. My heart slowed and thudded heavily in my chest. But finally I realized he had me over a barrel. If I kept nosing around, I might get Vera and Elena hurt or killed. The thought of Rath getting his slimy hands on either one of them, especially Elena, turned my stomach.

Rath said, "You get out tonight, and we leave the gals alone." He shook his head. "Sure hate to miss gettin' next to that Elena, though."

I grabbed him, jerked him to me. "You little bastard!"

He swallowed, but he said, "So help me, they'll get it. Let go. Let go of me. They'll get it sure."

"All right. I'll . . . quit. But if you lay a hand on either of them, I'll kill you."

He grinned. "Seven o'clock. There'll be somebody at the airport to make sure you blow." Rath climbed into the car and they left. I went back into the bar, got the bar phone and shooed the bartender away. It had occurred to me that

Rath would hardly have been so cocky — unless he *already* had one or both of the girls somewhere.

Elena didn't have a phone, but I called Vera's mother, got Vera and made sure she was all right. I told her to stay put, not go out alone, then hung up, grabbed a cab and told the driver to step on it. Sick worry built up in me and I kept seeing Elena's face, the dark eyes; I could almost feel the caress of her fingers and the cool pressure of her lips.

In Lomas we stopped in front of the apartments and I ran up and banged on Elena's door. It was unlocked and swung open. The apartment was empty. One blue slipper lay inside the front door. One. Its mate was nowhere in the apartment. There didn't seem to be any sign of a struggle, but in the bedroom I found a blouse and skirt, bra and panties folded neatly on a chair under which were shoes and stockings. The bathroom door was open and I went inside. The floor was wet in and near the shower, and a wet towel hung from the rack.

Elena had been here not long ago, had showered. But her clothes were still outside on the chair. They must have forced their way in and taken her just the way she was, maybe in a robe or coat from the closet, something to cover her nakedness. And I still didn't have any idea where they might have gone. I knew I couldn't trust Rath — or any of them. If I left on that plane tonight, no telling

what would happen to Elena. But if I didn't leave . . .

I went into the bedroom, sat on the edge of the bed. I'd already gone over half the town, asking questions, threatening, trying to buy or beg information, and I'd got nothing solid. There had to be some other way. I racked my brain — and thought of something. It was a two-digit license number that I remembered seeing on a custom Packard.

It took me an hour, and thirty-five hundred pesos, which was a lot of money, especially in Mexico. Over four hundred dollars, but it was worth it. I paid the money to a police officer and learned that the license plates had been issued to Arthur L. Hammond at an address in Cuernavaca — fifty miles away over a curving, dangerous road.

I rented the fastest car I could find and pushed the accelerator down all the way and kept it down except when not slowing down would be suicide. I couldn't be sure Elena would be at Hammond's, but it seemed likely. Chatita had told me Rath lived at Hammond's. I remembered the other things she'd told me too, and I thought with revulsion, almost with horror, of Rath's hands on Elena's soft body, his knife at her throat . . . his wet lips on her lips and flesh. I kept the accelerator down.

It's usually more than an hour's drive to Cuernavaca from Mexico, but I made it in forty minutes. My watch said seven-fifteen when I cut

the car lights and coasted to a stop near the big house where I knew Hammond lived. Three minutes at a service station, after I told the attendant the address, had given me the location, but three minutes were three too many. They'd know by now that I hadn't left on that seven o'clock plane. I took out my gun, checked it. Driving had loosened my muscles, but the pain that had been with me all day was even worse, and I wanted to be able to move fast, without pain slowing me.

I took the morphine surette from my pocket, pulled up my sleeve and jammed the hollow needle into my arm, squeezed half of the morphine into my blood. I knew how it would affect me, that it would keep me keyed up, make me a little light-headed, but it would kill the pain enough so I'd be nearly normal — and it wouldn't slow me down or blur my brain too much.

I got out of the car and walked through darkness toward the house. The Packard was parked in the driveway. Lights burned in the lower floor of the house, and thick vines covered the walls. I walked to the rear of the house, feeling the morphine working, easing the ache. My skin tingled slightly.

I heard a scream, suddenly stifled. It had come from the back of the house here, above me. On the second floor, light spilled from an open window and I heard a short cry again — from that room where lights blazed. Ugly pictures crawled

in my mind as I stared at the lighted window, then I walked toward the wall beneath it. Vines covered the entire wall, but I didn't know if they'd support my weight. Like a lot of the Cuernavaca houses, this one had small *terrazas* or balconies at many of the windows, including the one I wanted to reach. I pulled at one of the vines, let my body hang from it. It sagged, rustling and scraping slightly against the wall, but it didn't break.

I was a bit light-headed now, buoyant. I felt incredibly strong. And I was completely unafraid of what might happen to me. But there were no more sounds from the window above, and that scared me. I took off my shoes and pulled myself up the vines, finding spots to place my feet, straining upward with all the strength in my arms. It seemed to take hours instead of minutes, as if time had been distorted, but my outstretched hand touched the rim of the balcony and I wrapped my fingers around it, pulled myself up and then stepped over the rail.

I could see into the room, see part of a bed, a bare leg in my line of vision. I moved to my right, taking the .38 Colt from its holster. Elena lay naked on the bed, huddled against the headboard. There was fear in her eyes, and revulsion. The muscles along her flat stomach rippled with terror, and her breasts heaved as she drew in a frightened breath.

I couldn't see anybody else. With

the revolver tight in my right hand I bent and went through the open window fast. Elena jerked on the bed, rolled to one side and I looked toward her as I stepped inside the room. But even as I looked in her direction I sensed, more than I saw, movement on my right. I spun around bringing up the gun as Rath jumped toward me, his thin face twisted and ugly, and the gleaming knife in his right fist slashing up from his side toward my belly. Instinctively I thrust my hands at the slashing blade and felt it slice against my wrist, felt the jar against my gun just before it slipped from my hand and fell to the floor.

Rath jerked his hand back, thrust at me again with the knife, and I stepped aside. It seemed that I had all the time in the world and as the point of the knife leaped at me I slapped my hand past its arc and clamped my fingers on Rath's thin wrist. My other hand shot to his elbow, jerked as I pressed downward on his wrist, and in the slow motion of my mind I saw the knife turn to point at his chest, my fingers slipping down to cover his hand and imprison the knife there as he shouted in sudden pain. I gripped his elbow tight, then shoved with all my strength against Rath's hand.

The hand went back, carrying the knife against his chest. Slowly the knife went in, slowly, an inch, and then two, and it was as though no fine flesh and muscle and tendons

were there to stop the thin steel as it sank deeper into his chest until at the end it was buried there.

Rath staggered back, his mouth twisted. Perhaps it was the drug in my veins, or the blood pounding in my head, but it seemed that his face grew an expression not of fright or terror, but of an almost unholy pleasure. His lips were pulled back from his teeth and his eyes were stretched wide. I remembered that Chatita had said Rath liked to be hurt, to feel pain, and he was feeling pain now, deadly pain.

He stood quite still for seconds, facing me as his hands crept up to the handle of the knife and tugged gently at it, then still with that odd, crazed expression on his face he fell forward to his knees. Slowly he toppled to the floor, the projecting knife handle holding him at a queer angle. It took him quite a while to die.

I forgot to tell him about Chatita, and I wished I'd remembered. Rath seemed to die too happy.

I picked up the .38 and turned to the bed, every sense and nerve in my body keyed up and tingling. Elena threw herself into my arms, buried her head in my shoulder, and let all the horror and revulsion come out of her in a steady stream of tears.

She whispered, "Shell. Oh, my God, Shell," and then she pressed herself against me, put her arms around me and pulled me close, tight against her naked body.

She was a wild, hot, frenzied

woman for a long minute, savagely alive in my arms, pressing against me, kissing me, clutching and caressing me with hands and breasts and body, as if she couldn't thank me enough, as if she were thanking me with everything she owned.

"Elena, honey," I said. "Who else is here?"

She pulled away from me, suddenly remembering where she was, suddenly remembering the danger around us.

"Hammond is here. That is all." She spoke in short phrases, her breathing as unsteady as my own. "Rath was . . . just getting ready to . . ." She shuddered. "I thought he was going to kill you with the knife. We heard something outside. I did not know what or who it was. When I saw you, I thought he would kill you."

I got off the bed, moved away from her, the gun in my hand again. "What about the others?"

"Hammond only is here. Downstairs. I do not know where." She paused. "Shell, what are you going to do?"

I grinned at her, the blood pounding through my veins, thundering in my head. "I'm going to kill him."

She licked her lips and stared at me, leaned back on the bed with her arms behind her, conical breasts thrusting forward, stomach sucked in sharply, the long smooth sweep of thigh and leg extending to the floor. She didn't speak.

I left her there and went out. I

found stairs leading into darkness below me and I walked down them, almost floating, alive in every pore and atom of my being. Then there was a hallway, light seeping under a door. I opened the door, stepped quietly inside.

Arthur Hammond stood at a bookcase on my right, his back to me. On his left a few feet away was a polished desk. There was a snub-nosed revolver on its top, out of place and ugly against the gleaming wood. Hammond's coat was off and I could see the strap of a shoulder harness he was still wearing. He must have taken the gun from its holster and put it on the desk top once he was safe in his home. He hadn't yet heard me.

I pointed my gun at his back, thumbed the hammer on full cock, let my finger tighten ever so lightly on the trigger.

"Hammond," I said softly.

He turned, placing his finger between the pages of a book he held in his hands. "What?" He blinked at me. For an eternity he stared at me, uncomprehending, then his features slackened as if the muscles that held his face to the skull were dissolving beneath the skin. His jaw sagged, his pouchy cheeks drooped, and he began to tremble.

"No, no," he said, his voice quavering. "Wait. Please, please wait." I could hardly hear him; his voice was a whisper floating in the room.

"This is it, Hammond," I said. "For killing Pete Ramirez. For a

lot of things that you've done."

"I didn't kill him. I didn't." He said the same thing five or six times, unable to take his eyes from the bore of the gun I pointed at him. My finger almost trembled on the trigger. The gun had a soft pull and I knew just a breath more pressure and the hammer would fall, the pin would strike, the slug would rip into Hammond's fat, quivering body. He knew it too. He kept talking, repeating the same words over many times, but he never stopped, as if he knew that once he stopped speaking, a bullet would slam into him, rip into his heart or his brain.

"I didn't kill him. It was a drug. In the gum. It couldn't kill him. Please. It was Rath, he gave it to him, put it in his pocket after he hit him. The kid wasn't supposed to get killed, just lose the race. I had to make him lose."

"But it killed him, Hammond, as surely as if you'd shot him. He might have died even if he hadn't fallen."

That was the first time I'd spoken for quite a while, and it seemed to break the almost hypnotic spell that had gripped him. He put his hands out in front of him and moved sideways a little — toward the desk.

He reached to his cheek and pinched it hard, unconscious of the movement. "Let me go, Scott," he said.

"No."

"I haven't done anything. You were right about the races, but I didn't mean to kill Ramirez. I had to win. I'd already wired the name of the winner, Ladkin, to the men in Los Angeles. He had to win. They'd have killed me." He kept moving slowly toward the desk. His body hid the gun from my sight now, but his hands were still in front of him.

"What men in Los Angeles, Hammond?"

He gave me some names, rapidly. They didn't mean anything to me — but they would to Cookie Martini. Then he said, "I'll make you rich if you let me go, Scott. We pick the winner here and bet on the other horses to make the odds right. There's books in the States, and some here, that take Mexico bets. There's millions in it. I'll make you rich." His right hand rested on the edge of the desk behind him.

"How do you *pick* the winner, Hammond?" Just a little more time, I thought. He was going to try it soon. He kept edging closer to the gun.

"We know, from friends, when a horse is ready for a good race. About the jockeys, we . . . bought a couple. One other was married, stepping out with a chippie, and we held that over him. Ramirez was just . . . a mistake, Scott, a bad break." He was getting some of his nerve back now. "Listen, Scott," he said. "Be sensible. You can take me in to the cops, but they won't keep me.

You know Valdez? He won't let a rap stick. He'll cover for me, fix any charges. There's no proof anyway. You can't win, Scott. And I'll give you a hundred thousand dollars."

"That's not enough." His hand was out of sight behind him now; I knew he had his hand on the gun, was just working up his nerve, pushing himself to the point where he could make his try. And I knew Hammond was telling the truth. I couldn't make a charge against him stick. Not here. And Valdez would get him out of any mess I got him into.

"I'll give you more, anything, anything you want."

"It's not enough."

He bit his lips. "You're a fool, Scott. Every man has a price. You've got your price, too, I know it." His voice got higher and louder as he kept on. "You're stupid, stupid. I can pay you; you're —"

It was a damnfool thing to do, but he did it. He dropped suddenly to the floor, his face as frightened as any face I've ever seen, but he swept the gun out in front of him, firing before the gun was pointed within a yard of me. He would have kept on firing, too, but I put that extra breath of pressure on the .38's trigger and it roared and flame spat toward Hammond's belly. He jerked as the slug struck and then I fired again, saw the small hole appear over his heart.

He slumped back against the desk and his head fell forward. He still

had the gun in his hand, though, and I couldn't take any chances. I shot him in the head. Yeah, that was sure a damnfool thing for Hammond to do. But I had to pull the trigger. I had to defend myself. Hell, he was going to shoot me.

He didn't move any more. He wouldn't. I couldn't help thinking that Hammond had been right: like everybody else I had my price; he'd just paid it. And I also thought that Valdez or Rath would have a hell of a time getting Hammond out of this mess.

There were still a few tag ends, including Kelly and the other strong arm boy, but they could wait. I left Hammond on the floor and went out, back up the stairs. Most of all, I wanted to get the hell out of there before any of the boys showed up. Taking care of them was one thing. Meeting them in their own back yard was another. I ran up the stairs quickly.

When I opened the door, Elena was still on the bed but her hands were pressed tightly against her eyes. I shut the door behind me. Slowly she took her hands from her eyes and looked at me. She looked at me for a long time as the fright left her face. When she spoke her voice was tight.

"I'm going to pieces, Shell. I was going crazy. I heard the shots. I . . . thought it might be you. And I wanted you to come back to me." She bit her lips, moved slightly on the bed, light gleaming dully on her nakedness.

"Get a coat on," I said. "Fast. We've got to get the hell out of here."

I was still feeling high, the blood still rushing through my veins, setting up a terrible din in my head. She grabbed a coat from the closet, a man's raincoat, shivered into it, and took one last look at Rath, dead and bloody on the floor.

"Let's go," she said, turning away. "Let's get the hell out of here, Shell."

She was still wearing the raincoat much later, but it wasn't covering a hell of a lot of her. It was open at the throat, spread in a wide V that gashed down to the tightly belted waist. Her legs were tucked under her on the sofa, in her apartment,

and I was sitting next to her and marveling about the wonderful raincoats they were turning out these days.

The drug had worn off now, but who the hell needed it any more. I leaned toward her, pulling her close to me. She ran a hand over the tape on my chest.

Her face was an inch from mine when she said softly, her eyes heavy-lidded and her mouth slack with passion, "You are hurt. But I will be careful with you, my Shell. You will see."

I pulled her tight against me, kissed the corner of her mouth, her cheek, then with my lips against her ear I whispered, "Elena, honey, be as careless as you like."



Dead Men Don't Dream

BY EVAN HUNTER

Charlie had been a nice guy. Now he lay in a coffin with his throat cut.

THE OLD neighborhood hadn't changed much. I was looking out at it now, standing near the window in Charlie Dagerra's bedroom. The tenements stretched across the cold winter sky like a grey smear. There was no sun. The day was cold and gloomy and somehow forbidding, and that was as it should be because Charlie Dagerra lay in a casket in the living room.

The undertaker had skillfully adjusted Charlie's collar so that most of the knife slash across his neck was covered. He'd disguised the rest with heavy make-up and soft lights, but everyone knew what lay under the make-up. Everyone knew, and no one was talking about it.

They passed the bottle, and I poured myself a stiff hooker. I'd come to the wake mostly because I knew there'd be liquor there. Charlie and I had been kids together, hitching rides on the trolleys that used to run along First Avenue. That was a long time ago, though, and I hadn't seen Charlie since long before I'd lost my license. I probably would never have seen Charlie again, dead or alive, if I hadn't run into



the Moose down on Fourteenth Street. He'd told me about Charlie, and asked me to come pay my respects. He didn't mention the fact that I had a three-day growth on my face, or that my eyes were rimmed with red, or that I stank of booze. His eyes had traveled briefly over my rumpled suit and my matted hair. He ignored all that and asked me to come pay my respects to a dead childhood friend, and I'd accepted. But mostly because I knew there'd be liquor there.

"So how you been?" the Moose asked now. He was holding a shot glass between two thin fingers. The Moose is a very small man with his hair thinning in an oval on the back of his head. He'd been a small kid, too, which was why we tagged him with a virile nickname.

"So-so," I told him. I tossed off the drink and held out my glass. One of Charlie's relatives filled it, and I nodded my thanks.

"I read all about it in the paper, Matt," the Moose said.

"Oh?"

"Yeah." The Moose shook his head sadly. "She was a bitch, Matt," he said. "You should have killed that guy."

He was talking about my wife, Trina. He was referring to the night I'd found her in my own bedroom, after four months of crazy-in-love marriage, with a son of a bitch named Garth. He was recalling the vivid newspaper accounts of how I'd worked Garth over with the butt

end of my .45, of how the police had tagged me with an A.D.W. charge — assault with a deadly weapon. They'd gotten my license, and Garth had gotten my wife, but not until I'd ripped a trench down the side of his face and knocked half his goddamn teeth out.

"You should have killed him," the Moose repeated.

"I tried to, Moose. I tried damn hard." I didn't like remembering it. I'd been putting in a lot of time forgetting. Whiskey helps in that category.

"The good ones die," he said, shaking his head, "and the bad ones keep living." He looked toward the living room, where the flowers were stacked on either side of the coffin. I looked there, too, and I saw Charlie's mother weeping softly, a big Italian woman in a black dress.

"What happened?" I asked. "Who gave Charlie the knife slash?"

The Moose kept nodding his head as if he hadn't heard me. I looked at him over the edge of my glass, and finally his eyes met mine. They were veiled, crowded with something nameless.

"What happened?" I asked again.

The Moose blinked, and I knew what the something nameless was then. Fear. Cold, stark, unreasoning fear.

"I don't know," he said. "They found him outside his store. He ran a tailor shop, you know. You remember Charlie's father, don't you, Matt? Old Joe Dagerra? When Joe

died, Charlie took over the shop."

"Yeah," I said. The whiskey was running out, and the tears were running in all over the place. It was time to go. "Moose," I said, "I got to be running. I want to say goodbye to the old lady, and then I'll be . . ."

"Sure, Matt. Thanks for coming up. Charlie would have appreciated it."

I left Moose in the bedroom and said goodbye to Mrs. Dagerra. She didn't remember me, of course, but she took my hand and held it tightly. I was a friend of her dead son, and she wanted to hold everything he'd known and loved for as long as she could. I stopped by the coffin, knelt, and wished Charlie well. He'd never harmed a fly as far as I could remember, and he deserved a soft journey and maybe a harp and a halo or whatever they gave them nowadays.

I got to my feet and walked to the door, and another of Charlie's relatives said, "He looks like he's sleeping, doesn't he?"

I looked at the coffin, and at the red, stitched gash on Charlie's neck, where it was already beginning to show through the makeup. I felt sick all of a sudden. "No," I said harshly. "He looks dead."

Then I went downstairs.

The neighborhood looked almost the same, but not quite. There was still the candy store huddling close to the building on the left, and the bicycle rental shop on the right. The iceman's wagon was parked in the

gutter, and I remembered the time I'd nearly smashed my hand fooling with the wagon, tilting it until a sliding piece of ice sent the wagon veering to the gutter, pinning my hand under the handle. I'd lost a nail, and it had been tragic at the time. It got a smile from me now. The big white apartment house was across the street, looking more worn, and a little tired now. The neighborhood had changed from Italian-Irish, to Italian-Irish-Puerto Rican. It was the same neighborhood, but a different one. I shrugged and walked into the candy store.

The guy behind the counter looked up when I came in, squinting at my unfamiliar face.

"Pall Mall," I said. I fished in my pocket for change, and his eyes kept studying me, looking over my clothes and my face. I knew I was no Mona Lisa, but I didn't like the guy's scrutiny.

"What's with you?" I snapped.

"Huh? I . . ."

"Give me the goddamn cigarettes and cut the third degree."

"Yes, sir. I . . . I'm sorry, sir."

I looked into his eyes and saw the same fear that had been on the Moose's face. And then I recalled that the guy had just called me "sir". Now who the hell would call a bum "sir"? He put the cigarettes on the counter and I shoved a quarter at him. He smiled thinly and pushed the quarter back at me. I looked at the quarter and back into his eyes. In the days when I'd been

a licensed private eye, I'd seen fear on a lot of faces. I got so I could smell fear. I could smell it now, and the odor was almost overpowering.

I pushed the quarter across the counter once more and said, "My change, Mac."

The guy picked up the quarter quickly, rang it up, and gave me my change. He was sweating now. I shrugged, shook my head, and walked out of the store.

Well, Cordell, I told myself, where now?

I knew where, of course. The nearest bar. Like a homing pigeon. Matt Cordell, boy bird.

"Matt?"

The voice was soft, inquisitive. I turned and found its owner. She was soft, too, bundled into a thin coat that swelled out over the curves of her body. Her hair was black, as black as night, and it curled against the oval of her face in soft wisps that didn't come from a home permanent kit. Her eyes were brown, and wide, and her lips looked as if they'd never been kissed — but wanted to be.

"I don't think I know you," I said.

"Kit," she said. "Kit O'Donnell."

I stared at her hard. "Kit O'Donn . . ." I took another look. "Not Katie O'Donnell? I'll be damned."

"Have you got a moment, Matt?"

I still couldn't get over it. She'd been a snot-nosed brat when last I'd seen her. "Sure," I said. "Plenty

of time. More than I need."

"There's a bar around the corner," she said. "We can talk there."

I grinned and pulled up the collar on my coat. "That's just where I was heading anyway."

The bar was like all bars. It had whiskey and the people who drink whiskey. It also had a pinball machine and two tables set against the long front window. We sat at one of the tables, and she shrugged out of her coat. She shrugged very nicely. She was wearing a green sweater and a loose bra, and when she shrugged I leaned closer to the table and the palms of my hands itched.

She didn't bother with a pre-amble. "Matt," she said, "my father is in trouble."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

"You're a private detective. I'd like you to help."

I grinned. "Katie . . . Kit . . . I'm not practicing any more. The Law took my ticket."

"That doesn't matter."

"Oh, doesn't it?"

"Matt, it's the whole neighborhood, not just my father. Charlie . . . Charlie was one of them. He . . . they . . ."

She stopped talking, and her eyes opened wide. Her voice seemed to catch in her throat, and she lowered her head slightly. I turned and looked at the bar. A tall character in a belted camel hair coat was leaning on the bar, a wide grin on his

face. I stared at him and the grin got bigger. Briefly, I turned back to Kit. She raised her eyes, and I was treated to my third look at fear in the past half-hour.

"Now what the hell?" I said.

"Matt, please," she whispered.

I shoved my chair back and walked toward the bar. The tall character kept grinning, as if he were getting a big kick out of watching a pretty girl with a stumble bum. He had blond hair and sharp blue eyes, and the collar of his coat was turned up in the back, partially framing his narrow face.

"Is something wrong, friend?" I asked.

He didn't answer. He kept grinning, and I noticed that one hand was jammed into a pocket of the coat. There was a big lump in that pocket, and unless the guy had enormous hands, there was something besides the end of his arm there.

"You're staring at my friend," I said.

His eyes flicked from the swell of Kit's breasts where they heaved in fright beneath the green sweater.

"So I am," he said softly.

"So cut it out."

The grin appeared on his face again. He turned his head deliberately, and his eyes stripped Kit's sweater off. I grabbed the collar of his coat, wrapped my hand in it, and yanked him off the bar.

He moved faster than I thought he would. He brought up a knee

that sent a sharp pain careening up from my groin. At the same time, his hand popped out of the pocket, and a snub-nosed .38 stared up at my face.

I didn't look at the gun long. There are times when you can play footsie, and there are other times when you automatically sense that a man is dangerous, and that a fisted gun isn't a bluff but a threat that might explode any second. The knee in my groin had doubled me over so that my face was level with the .38. I started to lift my head, and I smashed my bunched fist sideways at the same time. I caught him on the inside of his wrist, and the gun jerked to one side, its blast loud in the small bar. I heard the front window shatter as the bullet struck it, and then I had his wrist tightly in my fingers, and I was turning around and pulling his arm over my shoulder. I gave him my hip, and he left his feet and yelled "Hey!"

And then he was in the air, flipping over my shoulder, with his gun still tight in my closed fist. My other hand was cupped under his elbow. He started coming down bottoms up, and the gun blasted again, ripping up six inches of good floor. He started to swear and the swear erupted into an "Argh!" as he felt the bone in his arm splinter. I could have released my grip when I had him in the air. I could have just let him drop to the floor like an empty sack. Instead, I kept one hand on his wrist and the other under his elbow,

and his weight pushed down against his stiffened arm.

The bone made a tiny snap, like someone clicking a pair of castanets. He dropped the gun and hit the floor with a solid thump that rattled some glasses on the bar. His hand went instantly to his arm, and his face turned grey when he saw the crooked dangle of it.

The greyness turned to a heavy flush that mingled with raw pain. He dove headlong on the floor, reaching for the gun with his good arm. I did two things, and I did them fast.

I stepped on his hand first. I stepped on it so hard that I thought I heard some more bones crush. And then, while he was pulling his hand back in pain, I brought my foot back and let it loose in a sharp swing that brought my toe up against his jaw. His teeth banged together and he came up off the floor as if a grenade had exploded under him, collapsing against the wood flat on his face a second later.

"Get your broom," I said to the bartender. I walked back to Kit and helped her on with her coat.

"Matt, you shouldn't have," she mumbled. "You shouldn't have."

"Let's get out of here," I said.

She huddled close against me in the street. A sharp wind had come up, and it drove the newspapers along the gutter like furious sailboats in a hurricane. I kept my arm around her, and it felt good to hold

a woman once more. Subconsciously my hand tightened and then started to drop. She reached up with one hand and pulled my fingers away, staring up into my face.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I sometimes forget."

A sort of pity came into her eyes. "Where are you living now, Matt?" she asked.

"A charming little spot called the Monterey. It's in the Bowery. I don't suppose you've ever been there."

"No. I . . . I . . ."

"Who was the joker?"

"What joker?"

"The one who's picking up his arm."

"He's one of them. They've been . . . we've been paying them, Matt. All the storekeepers. My father with his grocery, and Charlie, everybody. That's why he was killed. Charlie, I mean. And now my father. Matt, he's refused to pay them any more. He told them they could . . . Matt, I'm frightened. That's why I want your help." It all came out in a rush, as if she were unloading a terrible burden.

"Honey," I said, "I have no license. I told you before. I'm not a real eye any more. I'm more a . . . a glass eye. Do you understand?"

She turned her face toward mine. "You won't help?"

"What could I do?"

"You could . . . scare them. You could make them afraid to take any more money."

"Me?" I laughed out loud. "Who'd be afraid of me? Honest, Kit, I'm just a . . ."

"What do you want, Matt?" she asked. "I haven't any money, but I'll give you . . . whatever else you want."

"What?"

"They'll kill my father, Matt. As sure as we're standing here, they'll kill him. I'll do anything." She paused. "Anything you say."

I grinned, only a little bit. "Do I look that way, Kit? Do I really look that way?"

She lifted her face, and her eyes were puzzled for a moment. I shook my head and left her standing there on the corner, with the wind whipping her coat around her long, curving legs.

I walked for a long while, past the public school, past the *Latticini*, past the bars, and the coal joint, and the butcher, and all the places I'd known since I was old enough to crawl. I saw kids with glazed eyes and the heroin smell about them, and I saw young girls with full breasts in tight brassieres. I saw old women shuffling along the streets with their heads bent against the wind, and old men puffing pipes in dingy doorways. This was the beginning. Matt Cordell had started here. It had been a long way up, out of the muck. There had been four men working for my agency. I had gone a long way from First Avenue. And here I was back again, back in the muck, only the muck

was thicker, and it was contaminated with a bunch of punks who thought a .38 was a ticket to the gravy train. And guys like Charlie Dagerra got their throats slit for not liking the scheme of things.

Well, that was tough, but that wasn't my problem. I had enough troubles of my own. Charlie Dagerra was dead, and the dead don't dream. The living do. They dream a lot. And their dreams are full of blond beauties with laughing eyes and mocking lips. And all the blondes are called Trina.

She startled me. She was almost like the dream come to life. I almost slammed into her, and I started to walk around her when she took a step to one side, blocking my path.

She had long blond hair, and blue eyes that surveyed me speculatively now. Her mouth was twisted in a small grin, her lips swollen under their heavy lipstick. She wore a leather jacket, the collar turned up, and her hands were rammed into her pockets. The jacket curved away from her throat in full-breasted defiance.

"Hello," she said. Her voice rose on the last syllable, and she kept staring at me. It was getting dark now, and the wind was brisk on the back of my neck. I looked at her and at the way her blond hair slapped at her face.

"What do you want, sister?" I asked.

"It's what you want that counts," she said.

I looked her over again, starting with the slender, curving legs in the high heels, up the full rounded thighs that pressed against her skirt.

When my eyes met hers again, she looked at me frankly and honestly. "You like?"

"I like."

"It's cheap, mister. Real cheap."

"How cheap?"

She hooked her arm through mine, pressing her breasts against my arm, tightening her hand there. "We'll talk price later," she said. "Come on."

We began walking, and the wind started in earnest now, threatening to tear the grey structures from the sky.

"This way," she said. We turned down 119th Street, and we walked halfway up the street toward Second Avenue. "This house," she said. I didn't answer. She went ahead of me, and I watched her hips swinging under her skirt, and I thought again of Trina, and the blood ran hotly in my veins.

She stepped into the dark vestibule of the house, and I walked in after her. She walked toward the end of the hall on the ground floor, and I realized too late that there were no apartments on that floor except at the front of the building. She swung around suddenly, thrusting a nickel-plated .22 at me, shoving me back against the garbage cans that were lined up underneath the stairway.

"What is this?" I asked. "Rape?"

"It's rape, mister," she answered. She flicked her head, lashing the blond hair back over her shoulder. Her eyes narrowed and then she lifted the .22 and brought it down in a slashing arc that sent blood springing from my cheek.

"This is for Lew," she said. She brought the small gun back and down again, and this time I could feel the teeth rattling in my mouth. "And this is for Lew's broken arm!"

The gun went back, slashing down in a glinting arc. I reached up and grabbed her wrist, pulling the gun all the way over to one side. With my other hand, I slapped her across the face, hard. I tightened my grip on her wrist until she let the gun clatter onto the garbage cans, a small scream coming out of her mouth. I slapped her again, back-handed, and she flew up against the wall, her mouth open in surprise and terror.

"We came here for something," I told her.

"You lousy son of a bitch. I wouldn't if you was the last man on earth."

I slapped her harder this time, and I pulled the zipper down on her leather jacket and ripped her blouse down the front. My fingers found her bra, and I tore it in two. I pulled her to me and mashed my mouth down against hers. She fought and pulled her mouth away, and I yanked her to me, my hand against her. She stopped struggling after awhile.

The wind kept howling outside.

I left her slumped against the wall. I threw a five-dollar bill onto the garbage cans, and I said, "Tell Lew to keep his bait at home. I'll break his other arm if he sends another slut after me. You understand that?"

"You didn't seem to mind, you bastard," she mumbled.

"Just tell him. Just tell him what I said."

I walked out of the building. I was sore, very sore. I didn't like being suckered, and most of all I didn't like being suckered by blondes. Matt Cordell had been suckered by one blonde too many, and that had been a good many drinks back. The more I thought about it, the more it burned me.

I was ready to find this Lew character and *really* break his other arm. I was ready to rip it off and stuff it down his goddamned mouth. That's the way I felt. The way I'd felt when I'd lit into Garth with the .45. Boiling inside, with a cold fury settling in my brain. You go to a funeral, you don't expect a boxing match. You don't expect punks shaking down a poor neighborhood. It was like rattling pennies out of a gum machine. It was that cheap. It stank, and the smell made me sick, and I wanted to hold my nostrils.

I kept burning, and before I knew it, I was standing in front of O'Donnell's grocery. I walked in when I spotted Kit behind the

counter. She was wearing a white apron, but even that couldn't hide the curves of her lush body.

"I'll take six cans of beer," I told her.

Her head jerked up when she heard my voice. "Matt," she said, "one of them was just here!"

"What? Where is he?"

"He just left. He said we'd better have the money by tomorrow or . . ."

"Which way did he go?" I was already halfway to the door.

"Toward Pleasant Avenue," she said. "He was wearing a tan fedora, and a green coat."

I didn't wait for more. I headed out of the store and started walking down toward Pleasant. I caught up with him about halfway down the block. He was big from the back, a tall guy with shoulders that stretched against the width of his coat. I walked up behind him and grabbed one arm, yanking it up behind his back.

"Hello," I said, "my name is Matt Cordell."

"Hey, man, you nuts or something?" He tried to pull his arm away but I held it tightly.

"Take me to the cheese," I said. "The head punk."

"Man, you've flipped," he whined. I still couldn't see his face, but it sounded like a kid talking, a big kid who'd lifted weights once. "Come on, man, leggo."

"You want to carry your arm away?" I asked.

"Cool it, man. Cool it." He tried to turn but I held him tightly. "What's your gripe?" he asked at last.

"I don't like shakedown."s."

"Who does? Man, we see eye to eye. Loosen the flipper."

I yanked up on it and he screamed. "Cut the jive," I shouted. "Take me to the son of a bitch behind all this or I'll leave a stump on your shoulder."

"Easy, easy. Man, easy. I'm walking. I'm walking."

He kept walking toward Pleasant, and I stayed behind him, ready to tear his arm off if I had to.

"He ain't gonna cut this nohow," the weight-lifter said. "He ain't gonna cut this at all."

"He's done enough cutting," I said. "He cut Dagerra's throat."

"You don't dig me, Joe," the weight-lifter said. "You don't dig me at all."

"Just keep walking."

He kept walking, and then he stopped suddenly. "Up there," he said, gesturing with his head. "He's up there, but he ain't gonna cut this . . ."

"At all. I know."

"Just don't drag me in, man. Just leave me be. I don't want no headaches, thanks."

I shoved him away from me, and he almost fell on his face on the sidewalk. "Keep your nose clean," I said. "Go listen to some of Dizzy's records. But keep your nose clean or I'll break it for you."

I saw his face for the first time. He was a young kid, no more than twenty-one, with wide blue eyes and pink cheeks. "Sure, man, sure." He scrambled to his feet and ran down the street.

I looked up at the redfront building, saw one light burning on the top floor, with the rest of the windows boarded up. I climbed the sandstone steps and tried the door. When it didn't open on the second try, I pitted my shoulder against it, and it splintered in a hundred rotting pieces. The hallway was dark.

I started up the steps, making my way toward the light on the top landing. I was winded when I reached it, and I stopped to catch my breath. A thin slice of amber light spilled onto the floor from under a crack in one of the doors. I walked up to the door and tried the knob. It was locked.

"Who is it?" a voice called.

"Me, man," I answered.

"Zip?"

"Yeah. Come on, man."

The door opened a crack, and I shoved it all the way open. It hit against something hard, and I kicked it shut and put my back against it. All I saw, at first, was Lew with his arm in a plaster cast, hanging in a sling above his waist.

His eyes narrowed when he saw who it was, and he took one step toward me.

"I wouldn't," I told him. My voice was soft. "I wouldn't, Lew."

"He's right," another voice said.

There was only one bulb burning in the room, and the corners were in shadow. I peered into one corner, made out an old sofa and a pair of blue slacks stretched the length of it. I followed the slacks up the length of the body, up to a hatchet face with glittering eyes, down again to the open switch blade that was paring the nails of one hand.

"Are you Mr. Punk Himself?" I asked.

The long legs swung over the side of the sofa, and the face came into the light. It was a cruel face, young, but old, with hard lines stretching from the nose flaps to the thinly compressed lips.

"The name's Jackie," he said. "Jackie Byrne. What's your game, mister?"

"How old are you, Jackie? Twenty-two? Twenty-three?"

"Old enough," he said. He took another step toward me, tossing the knife into the air and catching it on his palm. "How old are *you*, mister?"

"I'm really old, punk. I'm all of thirty. Really old."

"Maybe you won't get any older. You shouldn't complain."

"Charlie Dagerra was about thirty, too," I said. "He didn't get any older, either."

"Yeah," Byrne said. "That's just what I meant."

"How long you been shaking down the local merchants, Jackie?"

He grinned. "I don't know what you're talking about. The merchants donate money to me. I'm

their favorite charity. They like to give me money. I make sure no snot-nosed kids throw stink-bombs in their stores or break their windows. I'm good to them."

"You think you've got a new dodge, don't you?"

"What?"

"You heard me. You've stumbled upon a real easy game. Just point your knife and the storekeepers wet their pants. It's been done before, Jackie. By bigger punks than you."

"You don't have to take that, Jackie," Lew said. "You don't have to take that from this bum."

"You'll find your girl on a garbage can in one of the hallways," I told him. "She was missing some clothes when I left her."

"Why, you son of a . . ." He lunged toward me and I whirled him around and shoved him across the room toward the sofa. He landed like a B-29, and his head clunked against the wall, making a hollow sound.

"All right, pop," Byrne said. "Enough playing around."

"I'm not playing, Jackie-boy."

"Get the hell out of the neighborhood," he said. "You got a long nose, and I don't like long noses."

"And what makes you think you can *do* anything about my nose, Jackie-boy?"

"A wise guy," he said disgustedly. "A real wise guy." He squeezed the knife shut and then pressed a button on its handle. The knife snapped open with a whistling noise.

"Very effective," I said. "Come on and use it."

"Nerves of steel, huh?" he asked, a small smile forming on his thin lips.

"No, sonny," I said. "I just don't give a damn, that's all. Come on." He hesitated, and I shouted, "Come on, you simple bastard!"

He lunged at me, the knife swinging in a glistening arc. I caught his arm and yanked it up, and we struggled like two ballet dancers under the bare bulb. I twisted his arm all the way up then, bringing up my foot at the same time. I kicked him right in the butt, hard, and he went stumbling across the room, struggling for his balance. He turned with a vicious snarl on his face, and then did something no expert knife man would ever do.

He threw the knife.

I moved to one side as the blade whispered past my head. I heard it bury itself into the door jamb behind me. I smiled then.

"Well! It does appear we're even."

I took one step toward him, remembering Lew when it was too late.

"Not exactly, pop," Lew said.

I didn't bother turning around because I knew sure as hell that Lew would be holding the .38 I'd taken from him once today. Instead, I dove forward as the gun sounded, the smell of cordite stinking up the small room. My arms wrapped around Byrne's skinny legs, and we toppled to the floor in a jumble of twisting limbs.

The gun sounded once more, tearing into the plaster wall and Byrne shouted, "You dumb mug! Knock it off!"

He didn't say anything else, then, because my fist was in his mouth and he was trying hard to swallow it. I picked him up off the floor, keeping him in front of me. I lifted him to his feet and kept him ahead of me, moving toward Lew on the couch.

"Go ahead, Lew," I said. "Shoot. Kill your buddy and you'll get me, too."

"Don't move," he said.

I kept crossing the room, holding Byrne's limp body ahead of me.

"I said don't move!"

"Shoot, Lew! Fill Jackie-boy with holes. Go ahead, you damn fool, shoot!"

He hesitated a moment and that was all I needed. I threw Byrne like a sack of potatoes and Lew moved to one side just as I jumped. I hit him once in the gut and once in the Adam's apple, almost killing him. Then I grabbed Lew by his collar, and Jackie by his, and I dragged them out of the room, and down the stairs, and out on the sidewalk. I found the cop not far from there.

I told Kit all about it later.

Her eyes held stars, and they made me think of a time when I'd roamed the neighborhood as a kid, a kid who didn't know the meaning of pain or the meaning of grief.

"Come see me, Matt," she said. "When you get the time, come

see me. Please remember Matt.”

“I will, Kit,” I lied.

I left the grocery store and I walked over to Third Avenue. I grabbed the El there, and I headed for home.

Home.

If I hurried, I might still find a liquor store open.

The El rumbled past 120th Street, and I looked out of the window and down the high walls of the tenement cliffs. And then 120th Street was gone, and with it Matt Cordell’s boyhood.

I slumped against the seat, pulling my collar high, smiling a little when the woman next to me got up and changed her seat.



*It was a tough situation. He was helpless,
and the escaped con had hungry eyes on his wife.*

Stop Him!

BY BRUNO FISCHER

THEY CAME OUT of the woods in the late afternoon. I looked up, and there they were passing the crab apple tree, the hulking younger man and the shrunk old man.

They didn't say hello. They looked at my right foot, which was in a plaster cast.

"Guess you're Neal Taylor," the big man said.

He wore denim pants and a soiled T-shirt tight to his barrel chest and he needed a shave. The old man was in

nondescript rags that smelled.

"Yes," I said.

"Where's Lucy?"

I closed my book. "She's gone to the city for a few days."

Tiredly the old man said, "He's lying. She wouldn't leave him alone for long out here with that bum foot."

"Sure thing, Pop," the other said.



He came on the porch and grinned down at me. "We'll stick around. Where do we get a drink?"

"The pump is in the kitchen," I told him.

They went into the bungalow. I reached for my crutches and stood up.

The hot afternoon was very still. There were no other houses on the mile-long road that was hardly more than a track through the woods. Nobody had come up it in the two weeks we'd been here, and nobody would except Lucy, who had driven to town for food and would be back any minute.

The bungalow belonged to my friend George Dunn. It had no modern conveniences, no electricity, running water or phone, so his wife wanted no part of it. He hung onto it for occasional week ends during the fall hunting season. When I broke my ankle in the city, he offered Lucy and me the use of the bungalow until I would be able to return to work. "If you don't mind peace and quiet," George had said.

We didn't at all mind peace and quiet as long as we were together. We'd been married only ten months. Besides, this was the only alternative I could afford to convalescing in our stuffy city apartment.

Now, suddenly, there was too much quiet and no peace.

I hobbled into the living room. From there I could hear the pump squeak in the kitchen and the low muttering of their voices.

A rifle hung over the fireplace. It was merely there for show; it was unloaded, and anyway the firing pin was broken. But they wouldn't know that. Resting my weight on my good foot, I reached up for it.

I had it in my hands when they charged into the room. Before I could turn around, the younger, bigger man drove his fist into my face. The one foot on which I could stand shot out from under me. The cast on my other foot struck the floor and pain knifed from it all the way to my heart.

"You all right, son?" the old man asked anxiously.

He was bending over me. A revolver was in his hand. Gasping for breath, I looked past him at his companion who also had a gun, a heavy black automatic. He stuck it inside his belt and picked up the rifle.

"You didn't need to sock him," the old man told him. "He's crippled."

"Hell, Pop, he's lucky I didn't plug him."

The old man slipped an arm under my shoulders. "Can you get up, son?" His eyes were the weariest I had ever seen, but they were surprisingly kind. He helped me to the armchair.

I sank back, feeling my ankle throb in the cast. The man who had hit me was examining the rifle.

"Busted and empty." He dropped the rifle and kicked it against the wall and stared down at me. "So you

know who I am? You very sure?"

"Yes," I said. "You're Roy Kester."

"When did you hear about us busting out of pen?"

"I didn't hear," I said. "We've no radio and I don't see a paper often. I guessed. I knew you were serving a long term in Trevan State Prison and it's only twenty miles from here. And there was the way you asked for Lucy and the way you acted."

The old man had found a pack of cigarettes on the table and was lighting one hungrily. "You don't have to worry, son," he assured me. "We'll be on our way soon."

"Sure," Roy Kester said. "Just take it easy, Taylor. You can't blame a guy for wanting to stop off and see his wife after six years."

I put my head back against the chair and looked up at him. He was about thirty, two or three years younger than I. He was bigger and handsomer.

"She's not your wife," I told him. "She's mine."

"Last time I saw her she was married to me. Sleeping with me." A bleakness came into his face. "She pulled the divorce while I was in the pen."

The old man sitting at the table said, "You was going to be in for twenty years, Roy. She had her life to live."

"Yeah, I was inside and she was outside," Kester said bitterly. He shook a cigarette from the pack and turned back to me. "What's your line of work?"

"I'm a tax collector for the state."

"Plenty of graft, eh?"

"No," I said.

He laughed. "What d'you know, Pop, Lucy went out and got herself an honest working stiff."

"She was always a good girl," the old man said. And he put his arms on the table and his head on his arms and seemed to sleep.

Roy Kester went to the window where he stood looking out at the road. The stillness was back — the hot, cloying stillness in which I could hardly breathe. We waited.

Our jalopy could be heard approaching from quite a way off, its worn springs protesting against the rutted road. I listened to it come closer and stop. Kester stirred at the window and the old man lifted his head from his arms.

The car door slammed. Then there were her steps on the porch, barely audible because she wore rubber-soled sandals. Then she was coming through the screen door, and all three of us were turned to her.

Perhaps she said something, uttered some kind of sound far back in her throat. Her lips moved, but the slamming of the screen door behind her was louder than anything else. She had stopped just inside the doorway, and she stood there trim and lovely with a bag of groceries in her arm.

"Hello, Lucy," the old man said.

She drew in her breath, and that made her breasts swell at the low, square neck of her gingham dress.

And Kester's eyes were all over her — the eyes of a man six years without a woman and six years without this woman who had once belonged to him.

"Baby," he said, "you look as luscious as ever."

She didn't as much as glance at him. She moved to the table and put the groceries down and said, "Pop, did you have to come here?"

The old man lifted a hand and let it drop limply. "You hear what happened, Lucy?"

"I read it in the paper in town. You and Roy broke out of jail last night."

"You got the paper with you?" Kester asked.

"I didn't bring it home." She spoke to the old man. "What do you want from us?"

"Please!" the old man said. "We got to lay low a couple days till the heat dies down a bit. Then we'll go on. Ain't that all we want, Roy, a place to stay a couple days?"

"Yeah," Kester grunted, and he never stopped looking at her.

"Roy's got a fine hideout," the old man went on. "There'll be nothing to worry about when we get there. Dough waiting for us too. But we got to get through this part of the country. The hideout is —"

Kester said, "Shut up, Pop."

The old man nodded tiredly and lit another of my cigarettes.

"Neal, what happened to your face?" For the first time since her return Lucy spoke to me. She bent

STOP HIM!

over my chair, touched the swelling on my left cheek. "What did he do to you?"

"It's nothing," I muttered.

Kester drawled, "He tried to pull a fast one. I had to learn him." He tugged his gun out of the waistband. "Next wrong move he makes, or if you make one, he gets a slug in the belly. Understand?"

She straightened, trembling, beside my chair. She opened her mouth and then closed it without saying whatever she had intended to say to him. Her hand was on my shoulders and I could feel her fingers constrict.

"So you're stuck with us, baby," Kester said cheerfully. "Now how's about something to eat? Pop and me ain't had a bite since morning."

Without a word she took her hand from my shoulder and picked up the groceries from the table and started toward the kitchen. Kester stared after the undulation of her hips, and I could sense the hunger in him that was not a hunger for food.

From my chair at the living room window I saw Roy Kester do something to the jalopy. He had the hood up; evidently he was disconnecting a wire. Pop was napping on the sofa, snoring with his mouth open, and Lucy was in the kitchen preparing supper.

Kester came through the screen door carrying a big chunk of ice. We had no deliveries of anything here, so whenever Lucy went marketing

she picked up a piece at the icehouse in town. Up to now there had been a problem bringing it in from the car to the icebox because with my broken ankle I was absolutely no help to her. Now she had a man in the house to do the heavy carrying.

I heard her say, "Thank you, Roy."

After a few minutes he came out to the living room with dishes and silverware and set the table for four. She was giving him the chores that I would be doing if I were able to get around — and that no doubt he had done when he had been her husband. Now, to some small extent and for a short time, he was back in the routine.

I knew very little about him, not even the crime or crimes for which he had been sent to jail for twenty years. She almost never talked about him, or about her own past, as if with her marriage to me she was starting a completely new life. I had never, in fact, met any of her family. As far as I could tell, she'd been pretty much alone in the world when she'd met me.

Kester shook the old man awake. "Soup's on," he called out cheerfully.

Lucy brought me my crutches and I hobbled to the table.

The meal was eaten pretty much in silence. The two escaped convicts were too busy wolfing down food, and Lucy and I had nothing to say.

Afterward Kester and Pop played gin rummy. I was back in the arm-

chair, not reading as I ordinarily would have, just sitting there. Lucy was in the kitchen washing the dishes. The room darkened. Kester fetched the kerosene lamp from the fireplace mantle and set it on the table and lit it and the game went on.

Suddenly Kester's head snapped up from his cards and that look was in his eyes, and I knew she was in the room. He followed the movements of her body to the tiny square hall that led to the two bedrooms.

A few minutes later she was back, telling them that she had made up the bed for them in the other room. "It's a double bed," she said. "You'll have to sleep together."

Kester grinned at her. "It ain't Pop I'm hankering to share it with."

She looked at him and through him. She said tonelessly, "Neal, I'm tired. Let's go to bed." Then she turned and was gone.

I hobbled after her. When I entered our room, she was lighting the lamp. There were no keys to any of the doors in the bungalow, so I couldn't lock this one. All I could do was close it. I sat down on the bed and watched her pull her dress over her head.

I said, "How did he know you were staying here?"

Her fingers paused at the snaps of her brassiere. She took it off and hung it over the back of the chair before answering. "I've no idea."

"You must have kept in touch with him," I said. "Written him."

"No."

She put on the peach nylon nightgown I had given her for her birthday. It had practically no bodice and was close to transparent. She looked very lovely in it.

"Then how did he find out?" I persisted.

"He must have heard somewhere."

"From whom?"

"I suppose we have mutual acquaintances," she said.

I didn't believe her, but I didn't say it. Things were bad enough without starting an argument at this time.

She was pulling off my sock when the door flew open and Roy Kester came in.

The bedroom was small, as were all the rooms in the bungalow, and the soft kerosene light reached his face. His mouth hung slackly open as he stared down at her. Kneeling and bent forward, her breasts showed over the nightgown, and his face bore the greediness of a man who had been a long time hungry.

"All the time I dreamed about you," he whispered.

Lucy roused as if from a trance and threw her arms across her breasts. And he laughed.

My crutches leaned against the bed. I could use one of them as a club, I thought. A futile weapon, for he had two good ankles and a gun, but I would have to try. My hand crept toward the nearest crutch.

Laughing, he said, "Think of that, Taylor, all of a sudden the dame's modest. And after all the times I've

seen her stark naked."

She cowered at my feet, hugging herself, and my hand reached for the crutch.

He saw it. "Don't try making like a hero. All I'm here for is to remind you what happens if you pull anything. Maybe, Lucy, you got an idea sneaking out and bringing the cops. Well, get it out of your head. I'll be looking in here every once in a while. If you're not here, your husband catches lead. Understand?"

"You don't have to worry," she said.

"I'm just reminding you, that's all."

He left, leaving the door open. Slowly Lucy straightened up and I heard her sob under her breath. She went to the door and closed it and came back to me.

After the lamp was out, moonlight flooded the room. She lay in the circle of my arm in bed.

"Do you still care for him?" I asked her.

"I love *you*," she said.

"But you loved him once."

"Did I?" She seemed to be thinking it over. "I was very young when I married him. He was very handsome, and — and there was a certain virility about him."

"Did you know he was a crook?"

"Not when I married him, although . . ." She stopped; she seemed to have trouble expressing herself. "But when I found out — well, he was my husband and I stuck to him. Then he and Pop — that

armed robbery and getting caught."

"Who's Pop? He seems like a pretty good guy."

"He was one of Roy's cronies. That's how I happened to know him. He and Roy were both given twenty years. And two years ago I divorced Roy. But please, I don't want to talk about it now."

"All right."

I heard them go to bed in the room next door, and then I lay for a long time listening to the night.

"Lucy?"

She stirred against me. "Yes, darling?"

"We can both get out through the window."

"I've been thinking of that, but he did something to the car."

"Listen," I said. "I can get into the woods if I go slowly. I'll hide there while you run to the nearest house that has a phone and call the police."

"He said he'll kill you, and he will."

"But if I hide in the woods . . ."

"It's too much risk. They'll leave tomorrow or the next day. We don't have to worry."

Maybe not, I thought. But just barely maybe not.

I held her close in my arms and the night wore away.

All next day Pop sat in the living room playing solitaire, but Roy Kester couldn't stay in any one spot. He prowled the rooms and the grounds, and his restlessness was like

a smoldering fuse. And wherever he went to, inside or outside the bungalow, he always came back to wherever Lucy happened to be at the time.

Usually she wore shorts and a skimpy halter in hot weather, but today she had put on slacks and a polo shirt. Because of Kester; because of the way he seldom stopped looking at her. But it made little difference what she wore. She looked just as beautiful; just as desirable. If she had been covered with a blanket, his brooding eyes would have stripped it off her.

Sooner or later something was bound to happen, I kept thinking. There was nothing I could do to stop it. I sat helpless, only half a man with that broken ankle, watching and waiting.

I had never known weather could be so sultry.

Shortly before lunch he touched her for the first time. He stopped her as she passed, holding her wrist with one hand and his other hand caressing her.

She froze and looked at me with frantic appeal not to do anything. Pop stopped shuffling cards. The tableau held for a heartbeat or two, then she yanked away from him.

"Set the table, Roy," she said, trying to act as if nothing at all had happened. "It's time for lunch."

He passed the back of his hand over his mouth. Then he said, "Okay, where's the stuff?"

I sank limply back in the chair and Pop started clearing the table of

cards so that we could eat on it.

The second time Kester touched her was in the late afternoon. I was glancing through a magazine, and suddenly I was aware of the quietness. Both Lucy and Kester were outside. I took my crutches and went to the side window. He was talking urgently to her as she hung kitchen towels on the line.

His hand went to the back of her thigh. She moved away from him and he followed her.

"Only one day," Pop said pleadingly to me. "One more day and we can leave."

He stood beside me at the window, seeing what I was seeing.

Kester's hand was again on her. If I had had anything to kill him with, I would have killed him then.

"One more day at the most," Pop said, "and then you'll have her all to yourself forever."

She twisted away from Kester and ran to the bungalow. He didn't follow. With his head down, he strode back and forth near the clothesline, as if he were still caged in a cell.

That evening Lucy and I went to bed even earlier than the day before. It was only twilight, but our room was the one place where we could close a door between us and Kester.

We didn't sleep. We lay close together listening to them start to quarrel over their card game. After a while Kester said, "The hell with it!" and the screen door banged. Being a fugitive from the law, he couldn't have gone anywhere, but he must

have been outside in the dark at least an hour. We were still awake when he returned. He and Pop muttered to each other, and then there were the heavy footsteps on the way to the other room.

Except that he didn't go to his room. There were the two bedroom doors in the little hall, and instead of opening the right door he opened the left. Our door.

Naked to the waist, he loomed immense in the moonlight. I couldn't see his face clearly, but I could hear him breathe and I could sense the turmoil in him.

"What the hell you doing in his bed?" he said. "You're my wife."

Under the cover Lucy shrank against me.

"You hear me?" He advanced to the bed, his powerful shoulders hunched forward like those of a bull about to charge. "Get out of his bed!"

She found her voice. "Roy, don't joke. You know very well Neal is my husband now."

"I'm your husband. I never divorced you. They never asked me. You come to me where you belong."

I knew there was nothing I could say to him, or that she could either. He had been too long without her or any other woman, and he had had too many tormenting hours of being under the same roof with her.

He took out his gun and pointed it down at me.

"I'll kill him and then you'll have only one husband. Me!" Moonlight

flickered on his grinning lips. "You stay in bed with him, baby, and his blood will spatter all over you."

"Roy, wait! I'm getting out."

I tried to hold her, but I was too slow. She rolled to the edge of the bed and stood up in that clinging, transparent nightgown. Moonlight burnished her bare shoulders and her throat and her breasts swelling out of the low bodice.

His arm went about her waist. She shrank from him, but she didn't fight him. She looked at the black automatic his other hand held pointed down at me, and she was limp as he drew her to him.

I jumped out of bed on one leg, dragging my other foot in the cast after me. There must have been a great deal of pain, but I don't remember feeling it. I hopped to the crutches standing against the wall.

Lucy was screaming. She had put her body between us and was clawing at his gun. I got my hands on one crutch and raised it. I swayed, trying to brain him without hitting her.

He gave me the chance when he hurled Lucy away from him. I brought the crutch down then, but I was awkward and clumsy balanced on one foot and couldn't take the needed step closer to him. He side-stepped and caught the crutch easily on the downward swoop and wrenched it away from me. Then there was nothing between me and his gun.

Lucy, sprawling half on and half off the bed where he had thrown her, screamed again.

He didn't shoot me. I heard him laugh and I saw the crutch swing at me. I flung my arms over my head, but the crutch slammed through to my skull. He had used it on me the way I had intended to use it on him.

The floor jumped up at me. The moonlight was abruptly gone; everything was gone but the blackness in which I lay and heard somebody whimper.

Lucy, I thought, Lucy whimpering in despair. I tried to get to her, but the blackness held me and the whimpering receded and there was terrible silence.

The old man was bathing my head. I opened my eyes to find myself lying on the floor and the kerosene lamp was on.

"It's only a scalp wound," he said.

He squeezed out a washcloth in a basin on the floor. The water turned pink with my blood. What had saved me had been my arms breaking the full impact of the blow.

"Where are they?" I said.

Pop didn't answer. I didn't need an answer. There was only a plywood partition between the two bedrooms, and through it I could hear Roy Kester laugh.

Lucy was absolutely quiet.

"Don't take it so hard, son," Pop said. "It's not like they'd never slept together before."

Tiredness possessed his wizened face hovering over me. I didn't know how old he was, but he couldn't have been as old as he looked.

I said, "I'll kill him. There's an ax under the porch."

"You're out of your head. He'll see you coming at him. He'll make sure next time you don't wake up."

"Then give me your gun."

"You think I'm nuts?" He dropped the washcloth into the bowl and rose to his feet. "It's just tonight," he said. "Then you and Lucy will never see him again. Why should you take it so hard?"

I laughed, and I knew there was madness in my laughter. "It's all right for you. She's not your wife."

"The young make too much fuss about things," he said. "Roy was married to her. This is nothing new, them two together. If it wasn't like that, I'd maybe let you. Maybe even give you my gun. But she and Roy — well, what's once or twice more?"

He was a queer old man. He was a convict, a desperate fugitive from the law, but he had washed the blood off me and was begging me to understand.

I said, "You seem fond of Lucy."

"Yeah. I knew her since she was a little girl. Her mother was the finest woman there ever was."

"Then why don't you help her?"

Pop massaged his face with a vein-ridged hand.

"I'm old," he said quietly. "If they take me back to jail, I'll never get out alive. I'll never see the outside again. That's why I took the chance to bust out with Roy. I need him. He's got the hideout and he'll get the dough to see us through.

Without him the cops will pick me up in no time. With him I got a good chance." He turned his tragic face to me. "Don't you see what it means to me, son?"

"What about Lucy? What about me?"

"She's no kid. She's a grown woman. And he was her husband first." Anger touched his voice. "You make too much fuss over such a little thing. I need Roy bad."

And as we spoke here, she was with him beyond the plywood partition. Pop had a revolver in his pocket. I had to get it.

I sat up and grabbed at his legs so I could pull him down and get my hands on his throat and take his gun. But I had no more success with him than I'd had against Kester. He kicked me in the ribs and punched me in the face. Ordinarily I could have absorbed those blows and handled him easily, but I was too weak from what Kester had done to me. My head was spinning even before the kick and the punch.

Again I passed out. . . .

Next time I regained consciousness Lucy was with me. She was sitting on the floor with me and holding my head and sobbing, "Darling, darling." Then she saw that my eyes were open and held me tighter.

She still wore nothing but her nightgown — the flimsy bit of nylon in which she had gone to the next room and returned. It was ripped at the bodice.

After a while she helped me get

into bed. When she straightened up, I saw that her nightgown was torn all the way down to the hem so that it hung from her shoulders like an open robe. She pulled it together and stood flinching under my gaze.

"He would have come back and killed you," she said. "What else could I do?"

The alarm clock stood beside the lamp. It was more than two hours since Kester had come into the room.

"Are you looking forward to tonight?" I said.

She gasped as if I'd stuck a knife into her. "You mustn't say such a thing. I love you. I'll go through anything for you."

"All right," I said dully.

I moved to the bed and flung myself on it face down. She let me alone.

I didn't go out for breakfast. When she called me, I said I didn't want any. There was much I had to endure, but I didn't have to endure seeing her and Kester together.

All morning I stayed in the bedroom. At noon she brought me lunch on a tray, as if I were sick. I suppose I was — sick with hate and helplessness. I hardly touched the food.

A couple of hours later she came in to tell me she thought they were about to leave. Both of them had shaved with my razor and Kester had asked her for the car keys.

"They're going to take the car," she said, "but that's all right."

So at least there wouldn't be another night like last, and last night

would recede in time like a bad dream. I pulled her down to the bed with me and she cried a little against my shoulder. After a while we left the bedroom.

Pop, cleanly shaven, was back at his solitaire game. He smiled at us, gently, and didn't look nearly so tired. In the clear, quiet afternoon I heard the engine of the jalopy. Kester had repaired whatever damage he had done to it.

The sound of the engine died. A minute later Kester came in through the screen door.

"All set," he announced. "Lucy, you get your things packed."

All the air was suddenly drained out of the room.

Slowly Pop put down the cards. "What's on your mind, Roy?"

"My wife's on my mind, that's what. I got her back. Where I go she goes." He grinned at Lucy, who stood with her hands to her throat. "Going to be a long time at the hideout. Long nights and long days. But it'll be fine with you there."

She was so very quiet beside me.

Pop rose to his feet, a wizened, weary old man. "Let her be," he said.

"Use your head, Pop. As soon as we're out of here, Taylor will yell copper. I take her along as a kind of hostage. That'll keep him quiet."

"They'll promise not to say we were here," Pop said.

"A hell of a lot his promise is worth. He hates my guts. Anyway, I'm not arguing. She's coming."

Kester stuck his thumbs in his belt.

"Baby, you pack your clothes and come along nice and peaceful if you don't want to see me blow his head off."

Her face showed nothing. She was going to do it, I thought. She had no choice, any more than she had had a choice last night.

Pop stood at my side, his gun hanging loosely in his hand. Kester was looking the other way, at Lucy.

"You've got to let her be," Pop said very softly.

I knew he understood the situation now, realized there was only one way to stop Kester from taking Lucy. I snatched the gun out of his hand, and he didn't even fight me when I took it. Then I pointed the gun at Kester.

"All right, Pop," I said. "I'll stop the bastard. I'll stop him!" I fired the gun, and the bullet caught him in the stomach, and he doubled over and screamed like a woman. I kept firing the gun long after he was dead.

I stood on the porch with Lucy and watched the old man get into the jalopy.

Behind me in the bungalow lay the dead man, and the revolver that had shot him was on the table. We would give Pop quite a head start before Lucy went for the police. We wouldn't mention him at all. I would take all the blame — or the credit. The police wouldn't mind

that I had killed an escaped convict.

Pop turned my car around on the grass. When it faced the road, he stuck his hand out of the window and waved at me. I waved back.

I hadn't asked Lucy if he was her father. I hadn't had to ask. I supposed I'd known since last night when he had begged me to understand that what remained of his life depended upon his sticking to Roy Kester.

We stood on the porch watching the jalopy until it was hidden by the trees.

"I couldn't tell you about him," she said suddenly. "I was too — ashamed." She shivered, and I put my arm around her. "He won't get far," she said. "He has nowhere to go."

"I know," I said.

"He was always a thief," she said. "He ruined his own life and my mother's, and he almost ruined mine. He introduced me to Roy, and he let me marry him without telling me he was a thief, too. And he brought Roy here when they escaped. Pop knew where we were because I wrote him every month. A kind of duty to my father in prison, though I never felt anything for him. He —" She paused and turned her face away.

I didn't say anything. What in hell was there to say? I tightened my arm around her shoulders, and we walked slowly back into the house.



Triple-Cross

BY ROBERT
PATRICK
WILMOT



She's poison, the operative told Hanley. But he didn't believe it at first, and, in a way, he didn't really care.

HANLEY listened to the whisper of rain against the plate-glass front of the saloon and studied Spinelli's reflection in the bar mirror. God, didn't the guy ever shut up? The way he ran his yap made you sick to your stomach.

Spinelli swallowed his whisky, took a long gulp of the beer chaser, and flicked Hanley with a tentative, sidelong glance.

"If you ask me," he said, "this Mark Ibberson is clean. He's clean like a guy that's spent three days in a Finnish bath, getting swabbed by three babes named Smetana."

"Nobody asked you," Hanley said, hating the only slightly flawed cameo that was Spinelli's profile,

the oily profusion of Spinelli's tightly curling hair. Hanley was a big man himself, thick of shoulder and chest, with a dark saturnine face and a hard and bitter mouth that was like a wedge over a heavy, black-stubbed jaw. His pale eyes were red-rimmed and sunken, and fixed in the glassy stare of a man who has not had enough sleep for a long time. They gave Spinelli no hint of the dislike he felt for the smaller man; Hanley had the sort of eyes that told nobody anything at all.

"You're the doctor," Spinelli said. "If the Hanley Agency wants to keep diggin' away at a guy that ain't done anything, that's your

business and none of mine."

"You're getting paid for your part of it," Hanley said.

"Sure, and who's complaining? Only I just thought you'd like to know that Ibberson ain't chasing babes, or doing anything else out of line, so far as I could find out. The way I figure it, he's a sucker for Mrs. Ibberson, a guy who's only in love with his own old lady, God help him."

Hanley moved his whisky glass around in slow circles on the bar. "He'll have a hell of a time proving that," he said. "After today."

Spinelli lifted the padded shoulders of his coat in a shrug.

"Okay, so we plant a broad on him. So then Mrs. I. can lower the boom on him and collect plenty of dough. It ain't pretty, but I guess it's life."

"Ibberson's a revolving son-of-a-bitch," Hanley said quietly, staring down at the glass in his hand. "He beat Clare Ibberson up, a half dozen times. You know he broke her arm."

Spinelli's tapering, grubby fingers pinched a cigarette out of the crumpled pack on the bar in front of him. He fumbled in a pocket of his tight brown overcoat, extracted a sulphur match and snapped it into light with a black-edged thumbnail. "Funny, you mentioning that arm," he said, his eyes narrowed over the flare of the match.

"What's funny about it?" Hanley asked. His voice was pitched very low, and it sounded completely de-

tached, but his hand shook, raising the whisky glass to his mouth.

"Well, I heard a lot about that busted arm," Spinelli said. "At the Clavering Terrace, where the Ibbersons used to shack up when they were still working at being married. That arm is the hottest topic since Flying Saucers."

"Go on," Hanley said, his voice almost inaudible in the quiet barroom. "Go on, Sal."

"He didn't bust her arm. She did it herself, falling downstairs. She was cockeyed, see, stoned to the eyes. Oh, sure, she calls the cops, and tells 'em Ibberson did it. But it was no dice, 'cause one of the bellhops sees her fall and bust the flipper, and he told the cops. The Ibbersons got chucked out of the hotel afterwards, on account of her being always on the sauce."

"You lousy punk," Hanley said, his impersonal tone more frightening than any tone of anger. "You dirty bastard. You couldn't have told me this before, could you?"

"What the hell!" Spinelli said, his brown eyes widening, his voice balanced between derision and fear. "I figure you must know she was an alcoholic bum, since you put in so much time with her. I wasn't supposed to be keeping tabs on her, anyway. I was supposed to be checking her husband — remember?"

Out on the street a taxi door slammed. Hanley looked past Spinelli, out through the rain-streaked window of the saloon, and saw a girl

standing on the curb. The cab pulled away and the girl stood looking uncertainly about her, head bent against the driving rain. Hanley dug a bill out of his pocket, tossed it on the bar, and jabbed an elbow into Spinelli's ribs. "Let's go," he said. "Our twister just yarded herself out of a cab."

He went down the bar, moving with ponderous speed, and the girl smiled at him, recognizing him as he lumbered out into the rain with Spinelli at his heels. She was a tall blonde with a coarse-boned, sullen face and heavy-lidded dark eyes. Inside the shell of her transparent raincoat, a black dress lay sheath-tight on long, curving thighs and full breasts.

"Hello, Mr. Hanley," she said in a harsh metallic voice. "Swell weather for ducks, huh?"

Hanley nodded, unsmiling. He took the girl by the arm and began walking. Spinelli fell into step with them. They moved silently to the corner and crossed Lexington Avenue, into the street in which Mark Ibberson lived. It was a quiet street, tree-shaded, almost empty, a street scoured clean of life by the raw wind of the rainy afternoon.

Neil Garson, one of Hanley's part-time operatives, sat in a car parked half way down the block from the apartment house in which Ibberson lived. Slouched over the wheel with a book in his hands, young Garson looked like a college student.

Hanley gave him an almost imper-

ceptible nod, walked on with Spinelli and the girl and entered the foyer of the apartment house. The foyer was a small chamber, dark, deserted, and quietly elegant.

"You know what you're supposed to do," Hanley said to the girl, his voice no louder than a rustling leaf in the silence of the room. "The guy's not too well, and he sleeps a couple of hours after lunch every afternoon. I'll go in and unlock the door first, and when I come out you go right in."

"How long before you boys come busting in?" the girl asked.

"We'll give you a minute," Hanley answered. His pale eyes looked at the tight dress beneath the raincoat, and his hard mouth twisted into a brief sardonic grin. "A minute oughta be plenty for you, baby. The guy's bedroom is across the living room, first door to the left."

"Suppose he isn't asleep? Suppose he hears me, and I don't even get time to take my coat off, let alone anything else? What do I do then?"

"I'll take a peek at him and see if he's sleeping," Hanley told her. "But just in case you don't get time to do a full strip routine, I'll tell you what you do. You grab the guy and smear a yard of that lipstick on his puss, and hope for the best."

"What I can't figure out is how come you guys have got a key to this john's apartment. It don't make much in the sense department, to me. Of course, I'm just a innocent country girl from Dakota, and there's

lots of things I don't understand."

Spinelli smiled and stepped close to the blonde. "I'll bet you burned up more of Dakota than the drought, too," he said, and put a hand inside the girl's raincoat. "But the way you're built, honey, you should worry if you ain't smart. You got a body will answer all the important questions."

"Well, you aren't answering my question doing what you're doing, Buster."

"If we want a key to a place, we know how to get it. Keys come a lot cheaper than you do, baby."

The blonde giggled. "But it isn't exactly legal, is it?"

"You'd be surprised how many things aren't," Spinelli said, and now he had both of his hands inside the raincoat.

Hanley cursed them softly. "Break it up," he said. "I'll be right back." He turned, took a key from his overcoat pocket, unlocked the inner door of the foyer and disappeared into the darkness of the hall beyond. In a few moments he was back, his face impassive, a heavy and weary mask. He had a grimy ten dollar bill wrapped around two thick fingers of his right hand, and he held it out to the girl, jabbing his finger tips against her breast.

"The john ain't home," he said. "The deal's off for today. Take ten for your trouble, and I'll phone you when I rig the thing again."

The blonde looked at the ten dollar bill, her harsh mouth crimped

into a scornful knot. "I was supposed to get a hundred bucks for this caper," she said. "Can I help it if the mark isn't home? It oughta be at least twenty for a girl to go out of the house on a day like this."

"You'd never really be worth more than two dollars," Hanley said tonelessly, "even as pork. You want the sawbuck, baby, or you want the back of my hand?"

The girl took the ten dollar bill. She gave Hanley a single glance of hatred, smiled bitterly at Spinelli, and walked out onto the street.

Hanley took a cheap cigar from his breast pocket, lighted it deliberately and nodded at Spinelli, speaking no word. He went ahead of him out onto the street, a shambling lonely figure in a shabby overcoat, a soiled gray hat pulled low on his brow.

The wind had died, and the rain had turned into a substance that was neither rain nor snow, but both — drizzling wet flakes that melted almost instantly against their cheeks. Hanley walked down the street to where Neil Garson sat in the parked car, and tapped on the front window.

"No ball game today, Neil," he said. "Wet grounds. I'll call you later, kid."

He turned away from the car, without another glance at Garson, and plodded on down the sidewalk, with Spinelli following slightly behind him. He walked twenty yards farther along the street, stopped be-

fore a half-opened gate of wrought iron. Beyond the gate a short, blind alley led to the service door of an apartment house.

"A real blister, that babe," Spinelli said, making uneasy conversation, as if suddenly frightened by the complete lack of expression in the eyes Hanley turned on him. "A bum, of course, but built like a brick smokehouse. If you like them like that, huh, Boss?"

Hanley hit him twice, suddenly, savagely, with a left hook that gashed Spinelli's right eyebrow and a short, chopping right hand that smashed the cupid's bow lips into crimson pulp. Spinelli staggered half a dozen feet into the alley, spun entirely around by the force of the second blow, and fell upon his hands and knees. He crouched a moment, shaking his head as if to clear it, and then slowly rose to his feet.

"You found out a lot about Clare Ibberson, didn't you?" Hanley asked, his hands at Spinelli's throat. "You found out a lot while you was supposed to be checking her husband, huh?"

Spinelli spat blood, and clawed at Hanley's fingers. "All of us knew about her," he quavered. "Me and Garson and Anderson, too. Only we were scared to tell you, because we knew you'd gone overboard about the broad."

"Tell me," Hanley said in his emotionless whisper. "Come on, Spinelli, talk!"

"She's strictly bad coffee," Spin-

elli said, sobbing. "She's a real monster, Hanley, so help me God! She killed her first husband in California, when she was only eighteen. Got off, after the jury was hung, in two trials. She married another guy and had a kid, and then run off and left him and the kid when they was sick and broke. Ibberson's a decent guy, a good egg. She only married him for his money, and she hired you to get something on him, because she figured you'd frame the guy if she got her hooks into you deep enough. She'd go to bed with anybody wore pants, and still had strength enough to get 'em off."

"Prove it," Hanley said. "Tell me something to prove it before I kick your face through the back of your head!"

Spinelli was silent for a moment, and then his voice rose in a frantic wail. "I'll tell you something will prove it! I was in her apartment at twelve-thirty, just before I left to meet you. You thought she went to Connecticut, didn't you, after you and her had a late breakfast? Well, she didn't. She come back to the apartment, and I was there, because I know where she keeps her key, and I let myself in. Only she kicked me out — she kicked me out because it was plain she was expecting some other guy."

Hanley's fist blurred toward Spinelli's jaw, and with his other hand he jerked Spinelli's head forward to meet the blow. Then he stood back as Spinelli's eyes clouded

and he slumped slowly down to the alley floor.

Hanley looked down at him a moment, his face completely without expression, and then turned and left the smaller man lying there with his eyes staring sightlessly up at the gray autumn sky.

Hanley watched Clare Ibberson shut the door of her bedroom and stand with her back against it, her smile like something carved on a face that was pale beneath its rouge. She had hair the color of burnished copper, and enormous gray-black, faintly slanted eyes. The negligee she wore was a filmy cloud of black chiffon, a gossamer robe that seemed to dissolve like mist against the lights of the living room. Beneath it, Hanley saw the remembered loveliness of her body, the satin and ivory sheen of flesh that was unclothed except for the thin brassiere that held the pointed, up-thrust breasts, and the V-shaped wisp of silk that covered her where her stomach curved to meet her thighs.

Hanley suddenly stirred as though someone had struck him with a whip. His gloved hands clenched and unclenched at his sides.

"You didn't go to Connecticut," he said slowly. "You didn't go to Connecticut at all."

"The funniest thing happened," Clare Ibberson said, and her laugh was high and shrill and uncertain, a nervous laugh that jangled like vibrating wires. "I'd left all my money

at home. So I took a taxi and came back here after it, and just as I got in, the phone rang, and it was Sally French. To tell me she was ill, and asking me if I couldn't come next week end instead."

Hanley stood quietly, looking at the woman, saying nothing. She came towards him quickly, staggering slightly, more than a little drunk. Her arms went up and around his neck and she pressed herself against him, the planes of her body groping like fingers against Hanley's unyielding flesh.

"God, but you startled me," she said. "Coming in like that without making a sound. I didn't even know you were in the living room, until I heard you cough."

Hanley smelled the perfume that was like a cloud around her, the heavy scent that was like the distilled fragrance of all the gardenias in the world. He raised a hand, instinctively, to touch her body, then checked himself, and pushed her away from him with the palms of both hands.

"So there's a guy in the bedroom," he said. "A guy in there, after all you said I meant to you."

The woman's voice rose again in shrill, nervous laughter.

"Are you crazy?" she asked. "A man in there! You ought to know better than that."

"Maybe I ought to," Hanley said, "but I don't. I'm going to have a look at the bedroom, Clare."

The woman turned, ran unstead-

ily to the bedroom door, then turned to face Hanley, her face twisted with drunken fury. "All right!" she said. "There is a man in there! Do you think I'd wait forever for you to dig up something on Mark? You think I could live on the chicken feed you've been giving me, you flat-footed ape?"

Hanley's pale eyes began to darken slowly, like empty glasses filling with some blackish fluid. A muscle quivered in his cheek, but his face remained impassive.

"You didn't mean any of it, huh?" he whispered. "You didn't mean any of it about us, at all?"

"Of course I didn't mean it," she said scornfully. "Oh, you were mildly interesting at first — the big, strong, silent man — but I'm sick of slumming. Now get out! I'm going into the bedroom, and I'd advise you not to come after me. And if you don't get the hell out of here, right away, I'll call the cops. Real cops, and not a cheap, grafting private eye."

Clare Ibberson turned, went into the bedroom, and slammed the door behind her.

When she had gone, Hanley moved swiftly. He went to an ash tray that was heaped high with cigarette stubs, all of which bore traces of the bright coral lipstick that Clare Ibberson wore. He scooped up a score of the stubs with his gloved hands, dumped them into an overcoat pocket. He took a half-emptied bottle of bourbon from a coffee table, corked it,

and put it into another pocket. On a sofa, he found a black suede glove and a handkerchief that reeked of Clare's heavy perfume, and he tucked the glove and the handkerchief away in an inside pocket. Finally, he took out a handkerchief of his own, wrapped it carefully around a glass that was standing on the coffee table. The rim of the glass was smudged heavily with the bright lipstick, the oily cosmetic forming an almost perfect print of the woman's lips.

Ten minutes later Hanley was in the neat living room of Mark Ibberson's apartment. Working with methodical speed, he transferred the cigarette stubs from his pocket to a clean ash tray stand near the living room sofa. He wadded up the perfume-soaked handkerchief, stuffed it behind a cushion on the sofa and tossed the suede glove on the floor. He put the bourbon bottle on Ibberson's coffee table, unwrapped the lipstick-stained glass and placed it beside the bottle. When he had finished, he walked to the telephone in the corner of the room, called police headquarters and asked to speak to Lieutenant Mike Baker, in Homicide.

"Emmet Hanley speaking, Mike," he said, when he heard the familiar voice at the other end of the wire. "I just walked into the apartment of a guy named Mark Ibberson, and found him dead." He gave Baker the address of the apartment house

in a matter-of-fact voice. "I hate to lose a client, but I think it was Ibberson's wife that knocked him off, and she's a client of my agency. A drunken babe with a bad past record, and she's left clues all over the place.

"The gun? Yeah, it's here, Mike. I don't think you'll find any prints on it, though, because the lady was wearing gloves. I know, because she left one of 'em here, on the floor. Sure, I'll stay here, Mike. I'll stay right here till you arrive."

He hung up, and then walked across the room and pushed open the bedroom door. Mark Ibberson lay on his back on the bed, his pale face serene in death. Hanley stood looking down at the body for a moment, and then let out an involuntary cry of astonishment as he saw that the black automatic was missing from the dead man's hand.

He heard a sound behind him, whirled, and saw Spinelli standing in the bedroom door. There was a dried crust of blood over his half-closed right eye, and blood still seeped from his gashed and swollen lips. In one hand Spinelli carried the suicide weapon, and in the other he held the suicide note that had lain on the bed table when Hanley had first entered the apartment, forty minutes before.

"I figured you were lying when you said Ibberson was out," Spinelli said thickly. "I figured something was wrong, and that you'd go tell Clare. So when I come out of the

ether in that alley, I headed for here and found the guy dead, a suicide — just like you found him when you were in here before. You'd be kind of in the soup, wouldn't you, if they didn't find no gun, and no suicide note, and people knew you'd been here?"

Hanley's eyes came up to meet Spinelli's. For a moment he had known fear, and then the sickness of defeat. But now he felt only numbed. He was suddenly very tired; almost too tired to stand.

"Whatever you're going to do, you'd better do it," he said wearily. "The cops are on their way here."

"I heard you call 'em," Spinelli said. "After I come in here and got the note and the gun, I hung around outside, trying to figure out my next move. When I seen you come in here, I followed. I was in the hall, while you was planting the evidence."

"You punk," Hanley said. "You're queering me good, aren't you?"

Spinelli suddenly shook the paper in his hand, spitting out blood and excited words. "Boy, what a setup! The poor guy even puts it in his note that it's *her* gun. One *she's* got a license for, and that he took with him when they split up. Only she didn't know he took it. The poor guy loved her so much he apologizes for swiping her gun, and says he was too tired to look for one some place else."

"You punk," Hanley said again. Spinelli laughed. "Brother, when

you swear you *didn't* have breakfast with her, and when they find out it's her roscoe, Clare won't have an alibi in the world."

Hanley stood staring at Spinelli, saying nothing.

Spinelli ran his tongue across his crushed lips slowly, and then he shrugged and his gloved hand made a small movement. The automatic hit the floor and skidded across it to Hanley's feet.

Hanley's jaw sagged in amazement, and his tired eyes widened as he watched Spinelli fold the suicide note and put it into his pocket, his face twisted into a painful grin.

"I guess I oughta blast you for working me over the way you did," Spinelli said. "But that wouldn't pay no hospital bills. I'll settle for making you pay for getting me a new face." He glanced toward the dead man. "I know why *you* want to frame her, but I don't give a damn. All I know is I want to see that bitch get what's coming to her. She killed Ibberson, just as much as if she'd pulled the trigger herself. She's the worst kind of bitch there is. Somebody's got to stop her, and it might as well be us."

Hanley sat down on a chair, his

big body trembling and weakened.

Spinelli moved toward the door. "I've gotta shove, now, before the cops get here. It'd sort of complicate things if they saw me the way I look."

Hanley tried to speak, but there were no words in him.

"It's always tough the first time, Hanley," Spinelli said. "First love is tough for anybody. But don't worry about little Clare getting the hot seat, because that baby ain't for frying. They'll put her away long enough so that age will cure most of what ails her, but with a build and looks like hers, there's no electric chair made that will ever cook her. Not even on one side."

He opened the door and was gone. The door slammed behind him.

From somewhere across the city came the keening wail of a siren. Hanley listened to the sound for several seconds, and then he picked up the gun and tossed it onto the bed near Mark Ibberson. Then he walked slowly back to the living room and slumped into a chair. He sat without moving, his pale eyes staring at nothing, waiting for the police.

He was very sick.



The Loaded Tourist

A Novelette

BY LESLIE CHARTERIS



Why was a shoe manufacturer carrying rare paintings, jewels, books, stamps? The Saint considered it very curious.

THE LIGHTS of Lucerne were twinkling on the lake as Simon Templar strolled out towards it through the Casino gardens, and above them the craggy head of old Pilatus loomed blackly against a sky full of stars. At a jetty across the Nationalquai a tourist launch was unloading a boisterous crowd of holiday-makers, and the clear Swiss air was filled with the alien accents of Lancashire and London.

Simon stood under a tree, enjoying a cigarette. He disliked noisy mobs, and did not want to walk in the middle of one even the short distance to his hotel. Any one of the crowd would probably have reacted to his name, or at least to his still

better known sobriquet, the Saint; but none would have been likely to identify his face. The features of the man whose feuds with the underworld and the law had become legendary in his own lifetime were known to few — a fact which the Saint had often found to his advantage.

But at that moment Simon was simply avoiding a boisterous group of holiday-makers. He was still trying to take a holiday himself. He wanted nothing from them except to be left alone.

Presently they were gone, and the esplanade was deserted again. He dropped his cigarette and stood like a statue, absorbed in the serene

beauty of shimmering water and sentinel mountains.

From the direction of the Hotel National, off to his left, came a single set of footsteps. They were solid, purposeful, a little hurried. Simon turned only his head, and saw the man who made them as he came nearer — a stoutish man of medium height, wearing a dark suit and a dark Homburg and carrying a bulky briefcase. Simon caught a glimpse of his face as he passed under one of the street lamps that stood along the waterfront: it had a sallow and unmistakably Latin cast.

Then, hardly a moment later, Simon realized that he was not watching one man, but three.

The other two came from somewhere out of the shadows — one tall and gaunt, the other short and powerful. They wore snap-brim hats pulled down over their eyes and kept their hands in their pockets. They too moved quickly and purposefully — more quickly even than the man carrying the briefcase, so that the distance behind him was dwindling rapidly. But the difference was that their feet made no sound. . . .

It was so much like watching a scene from a movie that for several seconds the Saint observed it almost as passively as if he had been sitting in a theater. It was only as the two pursuers closed the last yard between themselves and the man with the briefcase, and the lamplight

flashed on steel in the gaunt one's hand, that Simon Templar realized that his immobility under the tree had let them think they were unobserved. And by then there was no time left to forestall the climax of their act.

The two followers moved like a well-coordinated team. The gaunt one's right hand snaked over their quarry's right shoulder and clamped over his mouth; the steel in his left hand disappeared where it touched the man's back. At the same moment, like a horrible extension of the same creature, the stocky one snatched the briefcase. Then, in the same continuous flow of movement, the knifed man was falling bonelessly, like a rag doll, and the two attackers were running back towards the alley between the Casino gardens and the gardens of the Hotel National.

The tingle of belated comprehension was still crawling up the Saint's spine as he raced to intercept them. He did not call out, for it was too late now to warn the victim, and he saw no one else close enough to be any help. He ran as silently as the two footpads, and faster.

He met them at the corner of the alley. The gaunt one was nearer, and saw him first, and swung to meet him. The Saint saw a cruel bony face twisting in a vicious snarl, but he had the advantage of surprise. His fist slammed into the face, and the gaunt man sat down suddenly.

The stocky one swerved and kept

on running. And because he still carried the briefcase which appeared to be the prize in the affray, Simon ran after him.

The stocky man had an unexpected turn of speed for a man of his build. Reluctantly, because he was not dressed for it, the Saint launched himself in a flying tackle that just reached one of the stocky man's pistoning legs. The man fell lightly, like a wrestler, but Simon kept his grip on one ankle. Then, as they rolled over at the edge of a clump of bushes, the man's other foot thumped into the side of the Saint's head. Colored lights danced across Simon's eyes, and his hold loosened. He must have been half stunned for a moment; then, as his head cleared, he was holding nothing.

A heavy rustling in the bushes, hoarse shouts, and the sound of more running feet mingled confusedly in his brain as he sat up.

A man bent over him, only dimly visible in the gloom; and the Saint instinctively gathered himself to fight back before he realized that this was a newcomer. The height was about the same as that of the stocky man; but the silhouette, round and roly-poly, was different. The voice that came with it, in excellent English, with a curious mixture of Continental accent and Oxford vowels, was reassuring.

"Are you all right?"

Simon picked himself up, felt his face tenderly, and brushed off his

clothes which were now dusty.

"I think so. Did you see my play-mate?"

"He ran away. I'm not built for running — or football tackles. What was it about?"

There were more hurrying footsteps, and the beam of a flashlight stabbed at them. In the reflected glow behind it Simon saw the outlines of a uniform.

"Here's someone who's going to be professionally interested in the answer to that," he said grimly.

The policeman spoke in the guttural dialect of the region. It was well out of the Saint's considerable linguistic range, but he needed no interpreter to translate it as some variant of the standard gambit of law officers in such situations anywhere: "What goes on here?"

The roly-poly man answered in the same dialect. His face in the light was round and soft and childish, with rimless glasses over rather prominent blue eyes. He wore a tweed coat and a round soft porkpie hat. He talked volubly, with graphic gestures, so that Simon easily understood that he was describing the Saint's encounter with the stocky thug, which he must have witnessed. The policeman asked another question, and the round man handed him a card from a small leather folder.

The policeman turned to the Saint.

"*Vous parlez français?*"

"*Mais oui,*" said the Saint easily.

"This gentleman saw me trying to catch one man. There was another. Over there."

They walked to where Simon had dropped the gaunt man. But there was no one there.

"He seems to have got away too," he said ruefully. Then he pointed across the promenade. "But there's the man they robbed."

The gaunt man had taken back his knife, but it had done its work well. Its victim must have died almost instantly. His face was composed and disinterested when they turned him over.

"The briefcase which you say they took from him," said the policeman, in French. "What happened to it?"

Simon shrugged.

"I suppose the fellow I tackled got away with it."

"And so we shall not know the motive for the attack," observed the round man thoughtfully.

"Without wanting to play Sherlock Holmes," said the Saint, with a trace of sarcasm, "I should guess that it might have been robbery."

The policeman was searching the pockets of the body. With a light touch on the arm, the moon-faced man drew the Saint a little aside.

"Restrain yourself, my friend. The police don't like to be teased. May I introduce myself? My name is Oscar Kleinhaus. I'm fairly well known here. I'll try to see that you have no trouble."

"Thank you," said the Saint,

curious about the man's interest.

The policeman was holding an Italian passport.

"Filippo Ravenna," he read aloud. "Of Venice. Married. Fifty-one years old. Director of companies."

"Was he a friend of yours?" Kleinhaus asked.

"I never saw him before in my life," said the Saint.

The policeman thumbed over the pages of the passport, and pointed at one of them.

"What is this?"

Simon looked over his shoulder.

"It's an immigrant's visa to the United States . . . issued a week ago. Apparently it has not yet been used."

"But you say you did not know him."

"I forget how many thousands of immigrants enter the United States every year," said the Saint, "but I assure you they are not all friends of mine."

Again he felt a warning tug at his sleeve.

The rotund Mr. Kleinhaus addressed the policeman again in his own dialect. He appeared to be arguing that the Saint was merely an innocent bystander who had tried to catch a couple of criminals, that he should not be treated like a suspect, that the policeman would do better to concentrate on the crime. The policeman seemed to be grudgingly impressed. He turned back to the Saint less aggressively.

"Your name, please?"

Simon had grown a little wary lately of the hazards of his reputation. In Switzerland, the traditional land of peace and neutrality, he had decided to make an attempt to reduce those risks when he registered at his hotel.

"Tombs," he said. "Sebastian Tombs."

"Where are you staying here?"

"At the National."

The policeman wrote down the information in a notebook.

For the first time now, there were more people walking towards them along the quai. It was late, but presently there would be the inevitable crowd.

Kleinhaus said something else to the policeman, and the policeman seemed to agree. Kleinhaus took Simon by the arm and steered him away.

"We'll phone the station to send him some help," he said. "We can do it from your hotel. Could you identify those two thugs?"

"After a fashion." Simon described them as best he could, as they walked through the gardens to the back entrance of the hotel. "I suppose the detectives will want to know that, for what it's worth."

"I'll pass it on to them when I telephone." They were in the lobby. "It'll be easier for me, speaking the lingo. And you don't want to get mixed up in it, and spoil your vacation. I'll take care of everything."

Simon looked at him pensively.

"You're very kind," he said. "Is

that just real Swiss hospitality?"

"I don't like visitors to have bad experiences in my country," said Mr. Kleinhaus. "Go to bed. Perhaps we shall meet again."

He raised his round hat courteously as Simon entered the elevator.

2

The Saint never stayed awake to ask himself questions to which he could only give himself imaginary answers. He slept as if nothing had happened, as if there were no loose ends in his mind, secure in the confidence that if the incident of that night was destined to be only a beginning it would reveal the rest of itself in its own good time. Life was like that for him. He did not have to seek adventure: his problem would have been to shake off its relentless pursuit.

He had just finished breakfast in his room when there was a knock on his door.

For anyone else, he reflected as he opened the door, it would probably have been only a waiter to take away the tray. For him, it had to be a woman. And not simply a woman, but a breathtakingly lovely one.

She was in her early twenties, Simon judged, with an exquisite figure beneath the thin material of her expensive dress, and a delicately beautiful face. The thick-lashed dark eyes that came up to meet Simon's were the kind that could kindle instantly with black fire.

She said, with very little accent: "Mr. Tombs — may I talk to you? I am Mrs. Ravenna." Her voice had a huskiness that the Saint found extremely intriguing.

"Of course," he said.

She came in and sat down. Simon poured himself another cup of coffee and offered her a cigarette. She shook her head, and he lit it for himself.

"I feel terribly guilty about your husband," he said. "I might have saved him. I just wasn't thinking fast enough."

"At least you tried to catch the men who killed him. The police told me. I wanted to thank you."

"I'm sorry I wasn't more successful. But if the police catch them, I may be able to identify them. I suppose you haven't any ideas about them?"

"I have none. Filippo was a good man. I didn't think he had any enemies."

"Did he have business rivals?"

"I can't think of any. We were quite rich, but he was successful without hurting anyone. In any case, he had got rid of his interests."

"What were they?"

"He manufactured shoes. It was a good business. But Europe today is an uncertain place. There is always fear — of war, of inflations, of unstable governments. So, we were going to America. Our quota number had just come through."

"I know. And he was going to start a new business there?"

"Yes. He talked about it."

"Well," said the Saint, "the police think it was just an ordinary robbery, don't they?"

"Yes."

"Don't you?"

She twisted her fingers nervously together. The taut bodice of her dress rose and fell again as she took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I don't know what to think."

The Saint stared at a plume of smoke drifting towards the ceiling. He tried half-heartedly not to recognize that his blood was suddenly running faster, in a way that had absolutely nothing to do with the young widow's appealing beauty. But it was no use. He knew, only too well, that he was in it again — up to his ears. . .

"I'm thinking," he said slowly, "that these muggers didn't just pick your husband by accident. They knew what they were after. They didn't even try to look in his pockets. They just grabbed his briefcase and ran. Therefore, they knew what was in it. What was that?"

"Some business papers, perhaps?"

"A shoe manufacturer would hardly be likely to have any trade secrets that would be worth going to those lengths to steal."

"You talk like a detective."

"Heaven forbid," said the Saint piously. "I'm only curious. What *did* he have in that briefcase?"

"I can't imagine."

"It must have been something

very valuable. And yet you know nothing about it?"

"No."

She was lying, it was as obvious as the Alps; but he tried not to make it so obvious that he saw it.

"Why did you come here?" he asked, "when you were just getting ready to move to America?"

"There were a few places we wanted to see before we left, because we didn't know if we would ever come back."

"And yet, on a simple vacation trip like that, your husband brought along something so valuable that he could be murdered for it—and never even mentioned it to you?"

Her dark eyes flashed suddenly hard, like jet.

"You ask more questions than the police! Are you insulting me?"

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I was only trying to help. If we knew what was in that briefcase, we might have a clue to the people who stole it."

She looked down at the twisting of her hands, and made a visible effort to hold them still. The fingers were long and tapering, and faintly tipped with coral.

"Forgive me," she said in a lowered voice. "I am on edge. It has been such a shock. . . . You are right. The briefcase is important. And that's really what I wanted to talk to you about. Those men—they did get it, didn't they?"

"Why, yes. I was chasing the man who had it. I brought him

down, but he kicked me in the face and got away."

"I thought, perhaps, he might have dropped it."

"I didn't see it again."

"Did the police search for it?"

"I don't think anyone would have. Even if the man dropped it, he had plenty of time to pick it up again while I was knocked half silly. Anyway, it wasn't around. And if the police had found it, they'd certainly have returned it to you."

Her eyes examined him uncertainly.

"If anyone found it . . . anyone . . . I would pay a large reward."

"If I knew where to lay my hands on it," said the Saint, a little frigidly, "you wouldn't have to ask for it back, or pay any reward."

She nodded.

"Of course. I'm being stupid. It was a foolish hope. Excuse me." She stood up abruptly. "Thank you for letting me talk to you—and again for what you tried to do. I must not bother you any more."

She held out her hand, smiled coolly at him, and was gone.

Simon Templar stood where she had left him and slowly lighted another cigarette. Then he walked to the window. From the balcony outside he was offered a superb panorama of mountains rolling down to the sparkling blue foreground of the lake, where an excursion steamer swam like a toy trailing a brown veil

of smoke; but irresistibly his eye was drawn downward and to the right, toward the corner outside the gardens where he had tackled the stocky man.

He could have persuaded himself that it was only an illusion that he could see something from where he stood; but the echoes of the false notes that Ravenna's wife had struck were less easy to dismiss.

He put on his jacket and went downstairs. After only a short search in the bushes near where he had tangled with the stocky man, he found the briefcase.

3

He figured it out as he took it upstairs to his room. The briefcase had flown out of the stocky man's grasp when the Saint tackled him. It had fallen in among the bushes. Then Kleinhaus had come along, shouting. The stocky man had been too scared to stop and look for it. He had scrambled the hell out of there. The police hadn't looked for it, because they assumed it was gone. And the stocky man hadn't come back to look, either because he was afraid to, or because he assumed the police would have found it.

And now the Saint had it.

He stood and looked at it for quite a while, behind his locked door. He only had to pick up the telephone—he presumed that Mrs. Ravenna was staying in the same hotel—and

tell her to come and get it. Or perhaps the more correct procedure would be to call the police. But either of those moves called for a man devoid of curiosity, a pillar of convention, a paragon of deafness to the siren voices of intrigue—which the Saint was not.

He opened it.

It required no instruments or violence. Just a steady pull on a zipper. It opened flat, exposing its contents in one dramatic revelation, as if they had been spread out on a tray.

Item: one chamois pouch containing a necklace of pink pearls, perfectly graduated.

Item: one hotel envelope containing eight diamonds and six emeralds, cut but unset, none less than two carats, each wrapped in a fold of tissue paper.

Item: a cellophane envelope containing ten assorted postage stamps, of an age which suggested that they might be rare and valuable.

Item: a book in an antique binding, which from the title page appeared to be a first edition of Boccaccio's *Amorosa Visione*, published in Milan in 1521.

Item: a small oil painting on canvas without a frame, folded in the middle to fit the briefcase but apparently protected from creasing by the bulk of the book, signed with the name of Botticelli.

Item: a folded sheet of plain paper on which was typed, in French:

M. Paul Galen
137 Wendenweg
Lucerne

Dear Monsieur Galen,

The bearer, Signor Filippo Ravenna, can be trusted, and his merchandise is most reliable.

With best regards,

The signature was distinctive but undecipherable.

"And a fascinating line of merchandise it is," brooded the Saint. "For a shoemaker, Filippo must have been quite an interesting soul—or was he a heel? . . . A connoisseur and collector of very varied tastes? But then why would he bring his prize treasures with him on a trip like this? . . . A sort of Italian Raffles, leading a double life? But a successful business man shouldn't need to steal. And if he did, his instincts would lead him to fancy bookkeeping rather than burglary. . . . A receiver of stolen goods? But then he wouldn't need a formal introduction to someone else who sounds as if he might be in that line of business. . . . And what a strange assortment of loot! There has to be a clue there, if I could find it. . . ."

But for ten minutes the significance eluded him. And at that point he gave up impatiently.

There was another clue, more positive, more direct, in the letter to the mysterious Paul Galen; and it was one which should not be too difficult to run down.

He put the jewels, the stamps and the letter in different pockets of his coat. The book and the painting, too bulky to carry inconspicuously, he put back in the briefcase. He hid it, not too seriously, under the mattress at the head of the bed. Then, with a new lightness in his step, he went out and rang for the elevator.

It took him down one floor, and stopped again. Ravenna's wife got in.

For the space of one skipped heartbeat he wondered whether her room too might have a balcony from which she might have watched him retrieve the briefcase from the bushes below; but he met her eyes with iron coolness and only a slight nod to acknowledge their acquaintance, and his pulse resumed smoothly when she gave back only a small, remote smile.

She had put on a small black hat and carried a purse.

"The police have asked me to go and talk to them again," she volunteered. "They have thought of more questions, I suppose. Did they send for you too?"

"I haven't heard from them since last night," he said. "But I expect they'll get around to me eventually."

It occurred to him that it was a little odd that he had not been asked to repeat the descriptions which Oscar Kleinhaus had promised to relay; but he was too busy with other thoughts to speculate much

about the reasons for it. He was grateful enough to have been dropped out of the investigation.

As they strolled across the lobby, he said: "Will you think me impertinent if I ask another question?"

"No," she said. "I want your help."

"When your husband went out last night — did he say where he was going?"

She answered mechanically, so that he knew she was reciting something she had said before.

"I was tired, and he wanted to look for a café where he had heard there were Tyrolean singers, so he went alone."

"Didn't you think it strange that he should take his briefcase?"

"I didn't see him take it."

Simon handed her into a taxi without another word.

He walked slowly toward the Schweizerhof. At the corner of the Alpenstrasse he bought a selection of morning papers, and sat down at the nearest café over a cup of chocolate to read through all the headlines.

He had just finished when a shadow fell across the table, and a familiar voice said: "Looking to see whether you are a hero, Mr. Tombs?"

It was Oscar Kleinhaus, and the disarming smile on his cherubic face made his remark innocent of offense. The Saint smiled back, no less disarmingly.

"I was rather curious to see what

the newspapers said about it," he admitted. "But they don't seem to have the story yet."

"No, I didn't notice it either. I'm afraid our press is a little slow, by American standards. We think that if a story would be good in the morning, it will be just as interesting in the evening."

"Would you care to join me?"

Kleinhaus shook his head.

"Unfortunately I have a business appointment. I hope I'll have another opportunity. How long are you staying here?"

"I haven't made any plans. I thought the police would want to know that, but no one's been near me."

"If they caught anyone for you to identify, they would want you. Until then, I expect they think it more considerate not to trouble you. But if you asked for your bill at the hotel, I'm sure they would be informed." The round face was completely bland and friendly. "I must go now. But we shall run into each other again. Lucerne is a small town."

He raised his collegiate hat with the same formal courtesy as the night before, and ambled away.

Simon watched him very thoughtfully until he was out of sight. Then he hailed a cab and gave the address which he had found in the briefcase.

The road turned off the Alpenstrasse above the ancient ramparts of the old town and wound up the

hillside into a residential district of neat doll-house chalets. The house where the taxi stopped was high up, perched out on a jutting crag.

Simon paid off the driver and was confirming the number on the door, with his finger poised over the bell, before he really acknowledged to himself that he had already had two opportunities to speak about the briefcase to interested parties since he had found it, and that he had studiously ignored both of them — not to mention that he had made no move whatever to report his discovery to the police. But now he could no longer pretend to be unaware of what he was doing, and the realization gave him a lift of exhilaration which the crisp mountain air could never have achieved alone.

The door opened, and a manservant with a seamed gray face, dressed in somber black, looked him over impersonally.

"Is Monsieur Galen here?" Simon inquired.

"De la part de qui, m'sieur?"

"I am Filippo Ravenna," said the Saint.

4

The room into which he was ushered was large and sunny, furnished with the kind of antiques that look priceless and yet comfortable to live with. The walls on either side of the fireplace were lined with bookshelves; on two others were paintings and a tapestry; in the

fourth French windows opened onto a terrace overlooking the town and the mountains and the lake. The carpet underfoot was Aubusson. It was the living room of a man of wealth and cheerful good taste, and the manservant looked like an undertaker in it, but he withdrew as soon as he had shown the Saint in.

The man who advanced to greet Simon was altogether different. He had a muscular build rounded with good living, a full crop of black hair becomingly flecked with silver, and strong fleshy features. White teeth gleamed around a cigar.

"Buon giorno, Signor! Sono felicissimo di vederla."

"We can speak French if you prefer," said the Saint cautiously. It was safer than trying to speak Italian as a native tongue.

"As you wish. Or German, or English even. I struggle with all of them. I want my clients to feel comfortable, and they come from so many places." He waved Simon to a couch facing the windows. "You have a letter, perhaps?"

Simon handed him the introduction. Galen glanced at it and put it in his pocket, and sat down.

"I knew you were coming," he said apologetically, "but it is necessary to be careful."

"Of course."

"Sometimes my clients are so preoccupied with evading their own export restrictions that they forget we have Swiss import regulations too. That is their own affair, but

naturally I want no trouble with the authorities here."

"I understand your position," said the Saint, understanding very little.

"Worse still," Galen said, "there are people who try to offer me stolen things. That is why it is so pleasant to meet someone who is recommended, like yourself. Aside from the risk involved with stolen property, it is so much trouble to sell, and the prices are bound to be miserable. It is not worth it."

Simon nodded sympathetically. So the eccentric assortment of treasures in Ravenna's briefcase was supposed to be his own legitimate property, which finally disposed of one theory but at the same time cut away one possible piece of solid ground. Why, then, all the secrecy and mystery?

The Saint said conversationally: "So your clients come from all over Europe, do they?"

"From everywhere between the Iron Curtain and Portugal — every country where there are these annoying restrictions on foreign exchange and the free movement of wealth. What a pity there have to be so many barriers in this primitive civilization! However, I have a nice central location, and Swiss money is good anywhere in the world.

"Also, I am very discreet. There is no law against my buying anything I choose, and not a word about our transaction will get back to Italy from me. Other people's problems are my business opportunity, but I

prefer to think of myself as a kind of liberator." He laughed genially. "Now, what do you have to sell?"

Simon gave him the chamois bag.

Galen took out the pink pearl necklace and held it up to the light.

"It is beautiful," he said admiringly.

He studied it more closely, and then pondered for several seconds while he carefully evened the ash on his cigar.

"I can give you four hundred thousand Swiss francs," he said at length. "Or, if you like, the equivalent in dollars, deposited at any bank in New York. That would be something over seventeen thousand dollars. It is a good price, in the circumstances." He draped the necklace over his fingers and admired it again; then his shrewd dark eyes turned back to the Saint. "But it is not a lot of capital for you to start building a new fortune in America. Surely you have some other things to offer me?"

Simon Templar nodded — and in that instant the realization that he had found a foothold again struck him with a suddenness that literally jarred the breath out of him.

It was all so simple, so obvious that in retrospect he wondered how it could ever have baffled him. Filippo Ravenna had been going to America to live and to make a fresh start. Ravenna was rich, but he would not be allowed to transfer all his assets across the Atlantic just by asking for a bank draft. Like

many another European, he had nothing but money which was not translatable through ordinary channels.

Then someone had told Ravenna about Paul Galen. So Ravenna had bought things. Things which were small, light in weight, easy to smuggle, and very valuable; things moreover which a man in his position could acquire without attracting undue attention. And he had brought them to Switzerland to convert back into hard money — with an introduction to Paul Galen, who had made an international business out of cooperating in such evasions, whose reputation in such tricky-minded circles was doubtless a guarantee of comparatively fair dealing and absolute discretion.

All that part of it was dazzlingly clear; and the other part was starting to grow clearer — some of it, at least.

The Saint found himself saying: "I left the other things at the hotel. You understand . . . I thought we should get acquainted first."

"I hope I have made a good impression," Galen said with lively good humor. "What else did you bring?"

"I have a small Botticelli," said the Saint slowly. He was stalling for time really, while his mind raced ahead from the knowledge it now had to fit together the pieces that still had to tie in. "It is a museum piece. And a first edition of Boccaccio, in perfect condition —"

There were suddenly angry voices in the corridor outside. The door behind him burst open as if a tornado had struck it.

It was Mrs. Ravenna, with her breasts heaving and her dark eyes afire. Behind her followed the manservant, protesting helplessly.

"Go on," she said. "What else was there?"

Galen was on his feet quickly. He glanced warily at the Saint as Simon stood up more leisurely.

"Do you know this lady?"

"Certainly," said the Saint calmly. "She is Signora Ravenna."

Galen almost relaxed.

"A thousand pardons. You should have told me your wife —"

"I am not his wife," the young woman said. "My husband was murdered last night, by robbers who stole his briefcase with the things he brought to sell. This impostor is an American who calls himself Tombs — he is probably the employer of the men who killed my husband!"

Galen moved easily around the couch, without haste or apparent agitation.

"That is quite an extraordinary statement," he said. "But no doubt one of you can at least prove your identity."

"I can," said Signora Ravenna. She fumbled in her handbag. "I can show you my passport. Ask him to show you his!"

"I'll save you the trouble," said the Saint amiably, in English. "I

concede that this is Signora Ravenna, and it's true that she's been a widow for about twelve hours."

"Then your explanation had better be worth listening to," Galen said in the same language.

It was produced so smoothly and casually that Simon never knew where it came from, but now there was an automatic in Galen's hand, the muzzle lined up with Simon's midriff. The melancholy manservant remained in the doorway, and somehow he no longer looked quite so helpless.

Simon's gaze slid languidly over the barrel of the gun and up to Galen's coldly questioning face. It was no performance that he scarcely seemed to notice the weapon. He was too happy with the way the other fragments of the puzzle were falling into place to care.

"I happened to see Signor Ravenna jumped on last night by the two thugs who stole his briefcase," he said. "I imagine he was on his way to see you then. I tried to catch them, but I didn't do so well. There's an independent witness, a local citizen, who saw me try, and he's on record with the police . . . This morning Signora Ravenna came to my room and asked me about the briefcase. She said she had no idea what was in it and couldn't imagine why anyone would attack her husband. I told her that so far as I knew the thieves had gotten away with it."

"A bluff, to try and make it look

as if they weren't working for you." Mrs. Ravenna said vehemently. "You had it all the time!"

"I didn't," said the Saint steadily. "But after you left, I went on thinking. It occurred to me that there was just an outside chance that the fellow I nearly caught had dropped it, and then nobody had thought of looking for it — everybody taking it for granted that somebody else had got it. I went back to the spot and looked. Sure enough, there it was in the bushes. I took it back to my room."

"You see, he admits it! I saw him again after that, and he didn't say anything about finding it. He meant to steal it all the time. The only thing he doesn't confess is that the whole thing was planned!"

"While Signora Ravenna was asking me questions," Simon continued evenly, "I also asked her a few. And I knew damn well she was lying. That made me curious. So I opened the briefcase. I found the painting, the book, the necklace which you have — and, of course, that letter of introduction to you. It was just too much for my inquisitive nature. So I came here, using Ravenna's name, to try and find out what was going on. You've been kind enough to explain the background to me.

"I know now that Ravenna was simply trying to turn his assets into American money which he could use when he emigrated — which, you've explained to me, isn't a crime

here, whatever they think of it in Italy. So now I'm satisfied about that — but not about why Signora Ravenna told me so many lies."

"I leave that to you. Monsieur Galen," said the beautiful young woman. "I would not even tell the police, still less a perfect stranger."

Galen's eyes shifted to the Saint.

"And what is your business, Mr. Tombs?"

"Just think of me," said the Saint, "as a guy with a weakness for puzzles, and as an incorrigible asker of questions. I have a few more." He looked at the woman again. "Are you positive your husband couldn't have discussed this deal with anyone?"

"Only with his best friend, who gave him the introduction to Monsieur Galen."

"And you're sure you never mentioned it to anybody?"

"Of course not."

"But as I said this morning, the jokers who waylaid your husband knew he was carrying something valuable, and even knew it was in his briefcase. How do you account for that?"

"I don't know how crooks like you find out these things," she said. "Why don't you tell us?"

Simon shook his head.

"I suggest," he said, "that those killers could only have known because *you* told them — because you hired them to get rid of your husband and bring you back his briefcase."

The servant in the doorway was pushed suddenly aside, and a short round man elbowed his way past him into the room.

"I am Inspector Kleinhaus, of the police," he said, "and I too should like to hear the answer to that."

5

"You see," he explained, "we had a friendly tip from Italy that two known Italian criminals had bought tickets to Switzerland. It was my job to keep an eye on them. I'm afraid they gave me the slip last night, for long enough to attack and rob Signor Ravenna. When I met you at the scene of the crime, Mr. Tombs, I didn't know if you might be associated with them, so I didn't introduce myself completely. But we kept watch on you. We saw you find the briefcase and take it to your room — incidentally, we recovered it as soon as you went out, with its interesting contents."

Galen put the automatic in his pocket and took out the necklace.

"Except this," he said conscientiously.

"Thank you," said Kleinhaus. "Meanwhile, Mr. Tombs, we went on keeping an eye on you, to see where you'd lead us. I still didn't know how deeply you were involved in the affair, and I was as puzzled as you seem to have been by the things Ravenna was carrying and by the motive for the robbery. Most of

that has now been cleared up. One of my men followed you here, and I followed Signora Ravenna myself after I talked to her at the police station a little while ago. Her answers seemed as suspicious to me as they apparently did to you."

"How long have you been listening?" Simon asked.

"I've been in the hall all the time. Monsieur Galen's servant was too agitated by the way Signora Ravenna reacted when he told her that her husband was already here to remember to shut the front door. It was very illuminating." The detective's bright blue eyes shifted again. "Now, Signora Ravenna, I still want to hear what you were going to say."

Her face was a white mask.

"I have nothing to say! You can't be serious about such an accusation — and from such a person! Can you believe I would have my own husband murdered?"

"Such things have happened," Kleinhaus said sadly. "However, we can check in another way. The two men have already been caught. Mr. Tombs will be able to identify them. Then you can confront them, and we'll see what they say when we — prompt them a little. . . ."

The false indignation drained out

of her delicately-molded face, and the features turned ugly and formless with terror. She moistened her full lips, and her throat moved, but no sound came.

And then, as if she understood that in that silence she had already betrayed her own guilt for all to see, she gave a choked little cry and ran past Galen, shoving him out of the way with a hysterical violence that sent him staggering, and ran out through the French windows, out onto the sunlit terrace that went to the edge of the cliff where the house perched, and kept on running . . .

Inspector Kleinhaus, presently, was the first to turn from looking down over the edge. With a conclusive gesture he replaced his absurdly juvenile hat.

"Perhaps that saves a lot of unpleasantness," he remarked. "Well, I must still ask you to identify the two men, Mr. Tombs — your name really is Tombs, is it?"

"It sounds sort of ominous, doesn't it?" said the Saint easily.

He still had eight diamonds, six emeralds, and ten valuable stamps in his pockets and no one was left to ask embarrassing questions about them. At such a time it would have been very foolish to draw any more attention to himself.





Payoff

BY FRANK KANE

Tony's men had been trying to stop the killer for five days — and all Liddell had was five minutes.

TONY MELISH was scared. It showed in the little twitch under his left eye, the thin film of perspiration that glistened on his upper lip.

"They're bluffing," he said. "Only they picked the wrong guy to bluff." He hit himself on the chest with the side of his hand. "They think they can muscle Tony Melish into a shake?"

The blonde looked up from her long, carefully-shellacked fingernails, smiled lazily. "From the way you've been acting the last four days, you sure could fool me." She was tall. Thick, wavy blonde hair cascaded down over her shoulders in shimmering metallic waves. Her body was ripe, lush. Swelling breasts showed over the top of her low cut dress; a small waist hinted at

full hips, long shapely legs concealed by the fullness of her skirt. She turned the full force of slanted, green eyes on Johnny Liddell. "He hasn't been out of this place in four days. He says they're not bluffing him. Look at him shaking apart."

"Shut up, you," the night club owner said.

Liddell looked over to where Melish stood in front of the fireplace, clenching and unclenching his hands. The years had made a lot of changes in Tony, Liddell realized. The lean wolfishness of his face was blurred by a soft overlay of fat. Flat, lustreless eyes still peered from under heavily-veined, thickened eyelids, but the soft, discolored pouches under them took away the old menace.

"How come you waited until the last minute to call me in, Tony?" Liddell asked.

The night club man shrugged. "I thought my boys could handle it. I thought they could smoke out the guys behind it." He spat angrily into the fireplace. "They got no place. I don't know any more now than I did five days ago."

Liddell nodded, glanced down at the typewritten sheet he held in his lap. "They want fifty grand or you get it tonight at eleven. No mention of any snatch or anything else — the dough or the works." He consulted the watch on his wrist, grinned humorlessly. "That leaves exactly five minutes. I can't do much for you in five minutes if your boys couldn't

even get to first base in five days."

"All I want from you is to stand by for a couple of hours." The night club owner wiped the perspiration off his upper lip with the back of his hand. "It ain't that I don't trust my own boys, but I just like the idea of having a gun handy I can be sure of." He stole a nervous look at the clock on the desk, compared it with his wrist watch. "They're bluffing. They got to be."

The blonde snorted, walked over to the big picture window, pushed back the blinds, stared down at the street ten stories below. Tony started to yell at her, checked himself. With a shrug, he walked over behind her, hands going around her, lips to her neck.

"No need of you hanging around, baby," he told her. "Go on back to your place. I'll talk to you in the morning."

The blonde coolly removed his hands from the front of her strapless gown. "By ouija board?" Her eyes flicked past him, ignored the rush of angry color in his face. "So long, Liddell. I hope you enjoy holding his hand."

As she walked across the room, her round hips worked softly and smoothly against the tightly drawn fabric of her skirt. She stopped at the door, hand on knob. "Mind letting me out of this vault, Tony?"

The night club man walked to his desk, jabbed at a concealed button. The door opened, and a thin man in a heavily-padded tuxedo mate-

rialized in the opening. His hand was jammed deep in his bulging jacket pocket; his small eyes hopped around the room. Finally, they came to rest hungrily on the blonde.

The fullness of her lips straightened out into an angry line. "When you get to the lower rib, it's really a birthmark," she said coldly.

The guard's eyes narrowed. He looked at Tony. "What the hell's she talking about?"

"I didn't know you weren't through undressing me," the girl said. She turned to look at Tony. "You were going to do something about this jerk looking at me that way."

"No," Tony said. "I'm going to do something about you when they stop looking at you that way, baby." He nodded at Mickey. "See that someone puts her in a cab."

The blonde stamped through the doorway. The door swung shut behind her.

"That dame's going to drive me screwy. I ain't got enough on my mind, she's got to get particular how a guy looks at her," Tony said. He wiped his forehead with the flat of his hand, stared at his damp palm. "You figure like me, don't you, Liddell? It's a bluff?"

"Maybe."

"What do you *mean*, maybe? You think they're crazy enough to think I'll kick in that kind of dough just because they talk tough?"

Liddell shrugged. "Maybe they

don't expect you to kick in. Maybe they figure on hitting you and using this —" he held up the typewritten sheet — "as a cover."

The night club man's eyes receded behind their discolored pouches. "Go on."

"If you did get it and the cops found this note, they'd be looking for a shakedown mob." Liddell brought a cigarette from his jacket pocket, hung it in the corner of his mouth, where it waggled when he talked. "From this, they'd never figure to look closer to home — an old partner, some of your own boys, for instance."

Tony watched the private detective apply a match to his cigarette, exhale twin streams of smoke from his nostrils. "You mean Marty Cowan? That's where you're wrong. He got the same kind of warning. He called me yesterday. They gave him until the day after tomorrow. How do you figure that?"

Liddell shrugged. "Maybe the shake is on the level. Maybe they figure to use you as a horrible example for the other boys so they'll come into line easier." He took the cigarette from between his lips, rolled it between thumb and forefinger. "This is just conversation. You said yourself I'm not up here to find out who did it. I'm just here to keep you company."

Tony nodded jerkily. "Yeah, that's right." He stole another quick look at the watch on his wrist. "Two minutes to go," he said. "How

about a drink, Liddell? I got some of that private stock you liked so much in the old days."

"Sounds good to me."

The night club owner walked over to his desk, jabbed at the button. The door swung open. Mickey's dark head appeared in the opening.

"Bring up a bottle of my private stock, Mick," Melish told him.

After the door swung shut, Tony drummed on the edge of the desk with thick fingers, stared at the closed door thoughtfully. "You were just making with the talk when you said it might be some of my boys, weren't you, Liddell?"

"Not entirely. It's a possibility. I don't see how else anybody could get at you." He looked around. "How many ways to get in here?"

"Just the stairway you came up." Melish walked over, sat on the edge of the upholstered chair facing Liddell. "They'd need a tank to get up there. First they got to go right through the club downstairs with half a dozen of my boys sitting around. Then they got to get past Mickey, who's staked out at the head of the stairs." Perspiration glistened on his forehead again. "Unless Mickey is in on it."

"It's been known to happen." Liddell slid his .45 from its holster, rested it between his thigh and the chair's arm. "He'd be the ideal guy to handle the contract."

"Why should he? The Mick's been with me since I ran the old

Variety Club down in the Village. Why should he want to see me hit?"

"Who knows? You saw the way he looked at the blonde. Maybe he figures he'll rate if you're not on deck. Maybe he thinks —"

Tony's jaw sagged. He jumped up, paced the room. "You're nuts." He stopped in front of Liddell's chair. "He wouldn't pull anything like that. Just for a dame?"

"Not only the dame, Tony. No guy likes to stay Number Two boy all his life. You were Number Two boy once. Seems to me your boss met with a bad accident. His tough luck was your good luck."

The night club man's face clouded ominously. Some of the old menace gleamed through the slitted eyelids. "He got soft. He didn't rate —" He broke off as the door opened, and as the bodyguard entered with a bottle, two glasses and some ice. His eyes followed the small man as he crossed the room, set the bottle and two glasses on the desk. "Pour it, Mick."

The guard dumped two pieces of ice into each glass, drenched them down with whisky from an unlabeled bottle.

"Ever try that private stock of mine, Mick?" Tony asked silkily.

The thin man looked startled, rolled his eyes upward without lifting his head. "You give us all orders to keep our hands off. The pouring whisky at the bar's good enough for me." He picked up the glasses, held one out to Tony, the other to Liddell. His eyes didn't change expres-

sion as he saw the .45 Liddell cradled carelessly in his lap.

"Try it once, Mick," the night club owner told him.

The bodyguard looked from Liddell to Tony, then down to the glass. "What's the idea?"

"Try it!" Tony's voice was edged, harsh.

The thin man shrugged. "Okay." He put one glass back on the desk, raised the other to his lips, sniffed at it for a second. Then, tilting his head back, he drained the glass. His thin lips tilted upwards at the corners in what was supposed to be a grin as he reached to set the glass back on the desk.

He never made it.

His body seemed to stiffen. He laced both hands against his midsection, stretched up on his toes. Then, slowly, his knees buckled, tumbling him to the floor.

Liddell was out of his chair in a second, kneeling beside him. Tony seemed frozen to the spot. "The rat. It was him. He tried to poison me!"

Liddell looked up, shook his head. "Not unless that stuff's sharper than the old days. He's bleeding." He pointed to a rapidly-spreading dark spot on the front of the thin man's jacket.

"Bleeding? How could that be?" Tony walked over, stared down at the body.

"Get back!" Liddell shouted.

There was a faint hum of an angry bee. Tony jerked his hands to his face. Red started to trickle through

the fingers. He pitched forward, hit the floor face down. He didn't move.

Liddell flattened himself against the floor, wormed his way toward the window. He applied a cautious eye to the corner, tried to locate the source of the shots.

Directly across the street was a hotel, a huge modern office building, and on the corner a department store. He eliminated the hotel as not being high enough and the department store as unlikely, settled for the roof of the office building. He leaned the barrel of the .45 on the window sill, watched, waited.

He didn't have long to wait. In a matter of seconds, a dark shadow separated itself from the other shadows, headed for the edge of the roof. Finally, a man's leg appeared over the edge, felt for the top landing of the fire escape. Then, the rest of the body came into view. The man peered over the railing to the alley below, seemed satisfied, started down the stairs.

Liddell waited until the upper portion of the man's body sat on the front sight of his .45, and squeezed the trigger. The boom of the .45 was deafening in the close confines of the soundproofed room.

Across the street, the man on the fire escape staggered. He tried to get back to the roof, stumbled to his knees. Slowly, he managed to pull himself to his feet, stood swaying. Liddell's .45 barked again.

The man on the fire escape stiffened, clawed at the guard rail. His

knees folded under him. He toppled over the low rail, crashed headlong to the alley below.

Liddell knelt with his eye glued to the window until he was satisfied that the gunman across the way had been alone. Then, he walked back to where Tony lay, turned him over on his back. A blue-black hole that was still bubbling under his right eye made it apparent that he was beyond help.

The private detective debated the advisability of reporting the shooting to the police, lost the decision. He had underestimated the danger a client had been in, had failed to give him the protection he had sought. Now, he reasoned, the only course left open to him was to get whoever had been responsible for the killing. He slipped a new clip into the .45, pulled Mickey's .45 from his pocket, substituted the used magazine for the one in the gun. Then he headed for the street.

The street was cool after the closeness of Tony's penthouse. The cross-streets were filled with heavy after-theatre traffic, but the avenue was relatively deserted. Liddell crossed the street, blended into the shadows of the tall office building. When he had satisfied himself that he was unobserved, he slipped into the alley that ran alongside it.

The man was spread-eagled over a stack of garbage cans. Lying nearby, its stock shattered by the fall, was a high-powered rifle equipped with telescopic sights and

silencer. Liddell leaned over the man's face, studied his features, failed to recognize him. Imported talent.

Quickly, efficiently, he ran through the man's pockets, transferred the man's wallet, a few papers, a key with a small red tag into his own pockets. Then, he retraced his steps up the alley, swung onto the avenue, headed for a cab.

Three hours later, Johnny Liddell sat at the table in his hotel apartment, scowled at the small pile in front of him. The dead sniper's wallet had given him nothing aside from the man's name and an address in Cleveland, neither of which meant anything to him. A few decks of heroin secreted away in an inner compartment of the wallet testified to the fact that the killer was a professional; the six one hundred dollar bills to the fact that he was a high-paid expert.

Liddell picked up a folded piece of notepaper, reread it for the third time. "Check into the Denton Arms in New York under the name of William Wellington. The enclosed \$400 will pay you for your trouble. If I still need you, I'll know where to reach you and the other \$600 and your instructions will be delivered by messenger before you do the job." It was unsigned.

Liddell pulled from his pocket the typewritten note Tony had received. He compared the typing, was satisfied both had been done on

the same machine. He leaned back, raked his fingers through his hair, swore under his breath. He was at a dead end — the sniper apparently had no more idea of who had hired him than Liddell had.

The telephone at his elbow started to shrill. He contemplated the advisability of not answering it, finally scooped the receiver from its cradle.

"Liddell?" The voice was low, husky, disturbing.

"Who's this?"

"Terry. Tony Melish's girl. I'm downstairs in the lobby." She paused for a moment, seemed to be taking a deep breath. "I've got to see you. Can I come up?"

"Come ahead. I'm in Room 462." He dropped the receiver back on its hook, stared at it speculatively. Then he picked up the wallet, the tagged key and the two typewritten notes, dropped them into his jacket pocket and hung it in the closet. He looked around, scowled at the bright overhead light, snapped it out, put on the bridge lamp over the armchair.

Then he lifted the phone, waited until the desk clerk had answered. "See that girl who called me on the house phone, Al?"

There was a long, low whistle from the other end of the wire.

"She alone when she came in?" Liddell asked.

"All alone. She headed for the desk, asked if you were in. I hope it was okay to tell her you were." A worried note crept into the clerk's

voice. "Hell, I didn't think anybody would mind if she —"

"She didn't talk to anybody after she called me?"

"There was no one else in the lobby. She walked right from the booth to the elevator. I don't mind telling you I didn't take my eyes off her from the minute —"

There was a knock at the door.

"Okay, Al. That's all I wanted to know." Liddell dropped the receiver on its hook, walked to the door, pulled it open.

She was even more breathtaking than when he had first seen her. The thick, blonde hair had been piled on top of her head. Her face was scrubbed clean of all make-up, save for a red smear of lipstick on her lips. She wore a full-length camel's hair polo coat, no stockings, a pair of loafers.

She walked past him into the room, waited until he had closed the door behind her. "Lock it," she said in a low voice.

Liddell snapped the lock. "What's it all about?"

"Tony. They got him just like they said they would, didn't they? What happened? You were there. You must have seen it."

Liddell nodded. "They planted a sharpshooter with a reacher —"

"A reacher?"

"A silenced rifle with a telescopic lens set-up. It was like shooting sitting ducks. They got Mickey, too, you know." He led the way to the couch. "Sit down and catch your

breath." She stood waiting.

When he helped her off with her coat, he whistled noiselessly. Under the camel's hair coat she wore only a pair of light blue silk pajamas, the trouser legs rolled up to her knees.

"I-I was ready for bed when the call came from the club. I was too scared to take the time to dress. I just grabbed a coat and ran." She walked closer toward him, put her hands on his chest. "I didn't know any other place to go, Johnny." Her full lower lip trembled. "Poor Tony. I thought he was just cracking up, seeing bogey men in the shadows. Don't let them get me the way they got him, Johnny."

"Why should they want to kill you?" Liddell fought to keep his glance at face level, lost the struggle.

"I was pretty close to Tony. They probably think I know who ordered the killing."

"Do you?"

The girl's face went a shade whiter. She wet her lips with the tip of a pink tongue. "Marty Cowan. He used to be Tony's partner."

Liddell nodded thoughtfully. "I know Marty. But why should he shake Tony down for money? He has all he'll ever need."

"He didn't want money. He figured Tony would scare and run out. Then Marty could step in and take over everything. Me included." She dropped her arms, walked to the window, looked out. "It was no secret that Tony was getting soft. Back in the old days when he was

really tough, he drove Marty out of the partnership. Marty never forgave him." She swung around. "Tony didn't scare, so Marty had to do it the hard way." As she walked back toward him, the sway of her breasts traced designs on the shiny silk of her pajama jacket. "Marty knows that I know."

"Why don't you tell the police?"

She shrugged. "Knowing it and proving it are two different things. They'd have to let him go for lack of evidence and then he'd come looking for me." She shuddered, massaged the backs of her arms with her palms. "Got a drink handy?"

Liddell nodded, walked into the kitchenette, came back with a bottle and two glasses. He spilled some liquor into each of the glasses, passed one to the girl.

"When you spoke to the club, did they tell you whether they'd found the guy who picked off Tony?"

The girl took a deep swallow from her glass, shook her head. "He was probably a hired gun. They'll never find him."

Liddell grinned glumly. "Don't bet on it, baby. They can't miss him."

She stopped with her glass halfway to her lips. "What do you mean?"

"I picked him off the roof with a .45. He's spilled all over the alley across the street." He dropped onto the couch at her side. "He was outside talent. Brought in from Cleve-

land especially for this job."

Her mouth was an "o" of amazement. "You went up against him with a .45, and him using a rifle with telescopic sights?" She moved closer. "No wonder Tony went running to you when he got in too deep. I'm glad I came."

"I didn't do Tony too much good. He's dead."

"But you got the guy who did it." She leaned back against the couch, strained her high, tip-tilted breasts against the fragile pajama fabric, stared at him in wide-eyed admiration. "Just like that. You picked him off the roof with a .45." Her eyelids half-veiled the green of her eyes; she studied him through the long lashes. "I could never pay you what you're worth to protect me, Johnny, but I'd like to try to make it worth your while." She leaned close to him, her breath warm, fragrant on his cheek. "Let me stay here tonight, Johnny. I'm afraid to go home."

"Okay, baby. Make yourself at home." He leaned over, found her lips with his. They clung for a moment, then she put the flat of her hands against his chest, pushed him away.

"Do we need all that light?" She pulled herself to her feet, walked to the lamp.

"I wasn't kidding poor Mickey," she said. "I *do* have a birthmark on my bottom rib." She pulled the blouse of her pajamas high enough to reveal a strawberry shaped blem-

ish on the whiteness of her body. She dropped the blouse, fumbled with the zipper on the pajamas, snapped off the light.

From where he sat, Liddell could hear the soft rustle of the silk as she slid out of the pajamas. Then, she straightened up. The whiteness of her body gleamed in the reflected light. Her legs were long, sensuously shaped. Full, rounded thighs swelled into high set hips, converged into the narrow waist he had admired earlier in the evening. Her breasts were full and high, their pink tips straining upward.

As she stood there, she raised her hands slowly from her sides and loosened the pile of hair on top of her head, letting it cascade down over her shoulders. It glittered in the faint light.

She padded across the room, stood proudly in front of Liddell.

The luminous hands of the clock set next to the couch pointed to 4:10. The blonde stirred uneasily, opened her eyes, stared around in the unfamiliar darkness. Suddenly, she sprang to wide-eyed wakefulness, sat up, pulled the blanket around her. "Liddell! Liddell! Where are you?" she said.

The door to the bathroom beyond opened, spilling a triangle of yellow light into the darkened living room. Liddell walked in, drying his still damp hair. He was dressed except for his shirt and tie. "Shower wake you, Baby? Sorry. You go on back to sleep."

"You're not going to leave me here alone?"

"I've got something I've got to do. You'll be all right here. Just don't answer any telephone calls or open the door. I have my key."

"But where are you going?"

Liddell balled the damp towel, tossed it at the open bathroom door. "To have a little talk with Marty Cowan before the police find out he's mixed up in this. There are a couple of things I want to ask him."

The blonde dropped the blanket, stood up. "Let the police do it, Johnny. Why should you stick your neck out any further?"

He pecked at her cheek, took his shirt from the back of a chair, shrugged into it. "Tony wasn't much of a guy, Baby, but he was my client. He didn't get much of a shake out of this deal, so I intend to give him his money's worth from here on in. He's going to get the full treatment."

She shook her head helplessly. "Don't. Please don't go."

"I won't be long, Baby," he promised. He lifted his shoulder holster from a peg in the closet, adjusted it, covered it with his jacket. "Marty Cowan still got that place on Twelfth Street?"

The blonde dropped her eyes, nodded. "I've never been up there. He kept asking me, but I never went." She looked up at him. "I want you to believe that."

Liddell nodded. "Don't forget what I said. Don't answer the phone

or open the door for anybody at all."

She nodded, slid her arms around his neck, pressed her body close to his.

Marty Cowan lived in an old, high-stooped brownstone house on Twelfth Street in the Village. It was one of a whole block of identical brownstones which had been converted into expensive flats.

Liddell climbed the high stone stoop, tried the vestibule door. It pushed open easily. On the hall door there was a neatly printed sign urging, "For your own comfort, please be sure this door is closed after you." The last one in apparently didn't believe in signs.

Liddell pushed the door open, obediently made sure it was closed behind him. There was no elevator; a flight of expensively carpeted stairs led to the upper stories.

Cowan's apartment, 2D, turned out to be second floor rear. Liddell knocked softly, applied his ear to the door. There was no indication of anyone being at home. After a moment, he repeated his knock. There was still no answer.

He tried the doorknob, found it locked, brought out a handful of keys. The third one he tried opened the door. He stepped in, closed the door behind him. He yanked his .45 from its holster, transferred it to his left hand.

He had the eerie, uncomfortable feeling that he wasn't alone in the room. He squinted into the dark-

ness, strained his ears for some sound that would betray the presence of someone else. There was no sound.

After a moment, Liddell slid his hand cautiously along the wall until he felt the light switch. He pressed the switch, throwing the room into sudden, blinding light. Simultaneously, he dropped to his knee, his .45 ready.

Marty Cowan, Tony's ex-partner, sat in an overstuffed library chair not ten feet from him, staring at him with unblinking eyes. His holster, with a snub-nosed automatic nestling in it, hung over the back of his chair, the butt less than a foot from his hand.

Liddell got up, walked over to where Marty sat. He bent over him, examined the three dark little holes that had ripped through the back of his head, spilled a cascade of red down his shirt.

From the dead man's lap, Liddell picked up a sheet of notepaper, typed on the already familiar machine, threatening death unless Cowan paid the unknown sender \$20,000. It was phrased almost identically with the note that Tony had received.

Liddell scowled, straightened up, looked around. On the table at the dead man's elbow there was a bowl of melted ice, two glasses half full of brown liquid.

He put his fingers inside one of the glasses, spread them out until he could lift the glass without defacing any of the prints on the outside.

Then he breathed on the outside of the glass.

There was no sign of a print.

He repeated the procedure with the other glass, found a full set of over-large prints.

"That's a big help," he said. "Killer wore gloves." He was about to set the glass back on the table when he caught the wail of a siren from somewhere close. Quickly, he went to the door and light switch and wiped off any possible fingerprints with his handkerchief.

From below, he could hear the stamp of heavy footsteps. He bolted the hall door, made for the bedroom. Inside, he closed the door after him, headed for the window, opened it.

It was a relatively short drop from the ladder to the square below.

Above, he could hear sounds of mounting commotion in the apartment he had just left. A light flashed on in the bedroom window and a hoarse voice shouted. Liddell made his way cautiously across the courtyard to a door leading to an alleyway beyond.

He had barely reached the courtyard door when a figure was silhouetted in the window above. Liddell kept going, reached the door, tugged it open and slammed it shut behind him. There was a series of sharp snaps and ugly, jagged holes ripped through the planking of the door.

Liddell kept going.

At the far end of the alley, he came into the street. A late cruising

cab stopped at his hail. Liddell gave the address of his hotel, settled back in the cushions. From close by came the wails and shrieks of police sirens.

"Nice quiet neighborhood," Liddell said.

"Happens all the time down here, mister," the cabbie said. "Couple of queens probably got into a fight over a truck driver and started marcelling each other's hair with a flat iron. Happens all the time."

The blonde started, looked up wide-eyed as Liddell let himself into his apartment. He ignored the questions in her eyes, headed for the end table, poured himself a drink from the bottle.

"What's happened? Marty isn't —"

Liddell repeated his prescription, nodded. "Dead. Shot through the back of his head."

He set the glass down, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Had a note in his lap threatening to get him unless he paid up. Just like Tony."

"I don't get it." The blonde shook her head. "All the time I thought it was Marty. I thought he was behind it."

Liddell shucked his jacket, slid out of his shoulder holster, dropped it on the couch. "Looks like it's all a neat package now. Cowan's dead, Tony's dead, the sniper's dead, and Tony's bodyguard has a half emptied magazine in his gun to prove he died protecting his boss."

He walked over to the window,

stared out. All nice and neat and nobody benefits — or do you, Baby?"

"What do you mean, Johnny?"

Liddell didn't turn around. "Tony was through with you, wasn't he, Terry? He was getting set to throw you out and you didn't like it. He must have been, or he wouldn't have let that little gunsel of his look you over like a piece of beef. When Tony's through with you, there isn't much you can do about it, is there, Baby?" He didn't wait for her answer. "You were determined not to stand still for it, that it, Terry?"

The blonde shook her head, couldn't seem to frame words with her lips.

"You don't have to tell me. I know you were in it up to your neck. You went to Marty with an idea."

"I didn't, Johnny. You're wrong, I —"

"It had to be someone close enough to Tony to know how soft he really was. It wasn't Mickey, or he wouldn't have stood there and taken that one in his belly. It had to be you."

The blonde caught her lower lip between her teeth, chewed it.

"All right," she said, "I did go to Marty. You knew Tony — he was fixing to swing me into that stable of hustlers of his, shipping me around the country like I was cattle or something. I told Marty how easy it would be to scare Tony. But that's all I intended. Just to scare him. I

didn't know about the guy with the rifle."

She walked over to the couch, helped herself to a drink. "The first I heard about him was when they told me Tony was dead. I rushed over to see Marty and he was dead in his apartment."

"You're a liar, Terry. You knew all about the guy on the roof. You set Tony up for the kill by opening the curtains and giving the signal."

"You can't prove that, Liddell."

"I don't have to. They can only burn you once — for killing Marty Cowan. And they'll have no trouble proving you did that."

"What do you mean?"

Liddell shrugged. "You signed that one, Baby. Marty was drinking with whoever killed him, but the killer was wearing gloves. It's a cinch it was a woman."

"Why?"

"Because a gun smart hood like Cowan, going up against a killer like Tony, even a softened-up Tony, would never let anyone but a woman get that close to him without grabbing for his gun. You probably even wore the gloves home, left them there to be found with the powder stains on them."

"Who else knows this, Johnny?"

Liddell shrugged. "No one — yet."

"You wouldn't turn me in, Johnny. Not now — not after we've —"

"Turn it off, Terry. You set me up for the kill when you set Tony up. You signaled your boy with

the reacher to take two, Tony and me. You couldn't have known that Mickey would come into the room just at eleven. Your boy took care of two, thought that was all, started to leave. That's when I got him."

The girl sobbed deep in her throat. "Even if that were true, I didn't know you then. I didn't know —"

"Is that why you just tried to frame me for Marty Cowan's kill — by tipping the police off to the fact there was a killing and I was there?"

"I didn't!"

"It had to be you, Terry. You were the only one who knew I was there. Only the person who killed Cowan could have known enough to tip the cops. I checked the switchboard on the way in. You made a call while I was gone." He took a deep breath. "That wasn't smart, Baby."

"Maybe I didn't think you were coming back, Johnny," she told him softly. "Maybe you're not too smart, either. Turn around."

He turned around slowly, looked into the muzzle of his own .45 in the blonde's hands. "I guess it's like they say — if you want a thing done right, do it yourself."

"Then it's all true?"

"Sure. I told Marty that Tony was soft, ready for picking, that we could scare him out and take over. When Tony didn't go for the shake and didn't take off, *Marty* started to get scared. I had to kill him to keep him from backing out."

Her finger whitened on the trigger.

"Tony had it coming. He was getting ready to throw me over. Only I wasn't standing still for it. I'm not standing still for anything from anybody any more. Not even you, Liddell." She clenched her teeth, squeezed the trigger.

The .45 clicked metallically.

"It shoots better with bullets in it," Liddell said.

She stared down at the empty gun, offered no resistance when he

walked over, wrenched it from her hand.

"I didn't intend to do it, Johnny," she said. "Honest. I didn't —"

He stood there looking at the pure beauty of her face, counted off the men whose deaths already lay at her door.

He raised his hand, hit her across the cheek with the flat of his palm, knocked her sprawling. She lay there quietly, a thin trickle of blood on her chin, while he phoned the police.



The Tears OF Evil



BY CRAIG RICE

Everybody loved Kathy — which was one of the reasons she was killed.

IT WAS, John J. Malone decided, a most satisfactory party. For one thing, George and Kathy Weston had invited only a few people to help them celebrate their crystal wedding anniversary; and, for another, none of the guests had yet expressed amazement over his personal taste in beverages. Straight gin with a beer chaser had never seemed an unusual combination to him, and it was a relief not to hear it referred to in incredulous tones by people who didn't know what they were missing.

Malone bit the end off a cigar, lit it, and inhaled it deeply. Fifteen years married, he thought. A long

time. And it couldn't happen to two nicer people than George and Kathy.

He had stationed himself by the table on which the liquor had been set out, and now, as he glanced around the Westons' luxurious living room, he discovered with some surprise that he was alone. Then he heard laughter from the direction of the kitchen: and now the question was, should he stay here and guard the liquor, or should he go out to the kitchen and join the others?

He had no choice, of course. He leaned his hip against the liquor table, sighed, and broke the seal on a fresh bottle of gin. To stand guard

duty properly, a man needed strength.

The clear liquid had just reached the brim of his glass when Malone glanced up and saw George Weston coming toward him from the direction of the stairs. There was something about George's handsome, flat-planed face that, somehow, made Malone forget his drink. He put the glass and cigar down slowly, while a strange tenseness stiffened his short body and tightened the muscles across his stomach. George was walking toward him as if every step was an effort, as if he were half drunk. But he was not drunk, Malone knew. George Weston was a teetotaler. And yet he was walking across his own living room almost as if he were lost in it.

When he was within a few feet of Malone, George stopped. His eyes came up to meet Malone's.

"Malone," he whispered. "Malone . . . for God's sake . . ."

Malone pushed away from the table and stepped close to his friend. He'd seen men in shock, and in hysteria; he'd seen men in most of the ways a man can be — but he'd never seen anyone with the expression that George Weston wore now. The nearest thing to it had been the look on the face of a punch-drunk prize-fighter he had watched, an instant before the fighter went down from a knockout punch.

"Damn it, George," he said sharply. "What's wrong with you?" He put both wide hands on George's

shoulders and shook him. "What's wrong?"

George wet his lips. "It's Kathy," he said. "She's—" He looked at Malone, and his lips moved, but there was no sound.

Malone shook him again. "She's *what*? Speak up, George!"

"She's . . . dead."

The floor beneath Malone's feet seemed to tilt, and for an instant George Weston's face blurred out of focus. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, and the word *dead* sickened through him. . . .

George's eyes moved slowly toward the stairs and back again.

"She's upstairs," he said. "Malone, she's . . ."

Malone's fingers came up to tighten around George's arm. "Come on," he said. He tugged George around and headed him toward the stairs.

"Where is she?" Malone asked.

"In her bedroom. She isn't just dead, Malone. She's — she's been murdered."

"George, you're out of your mind!"

George shook his head. They started up the stairs. "No," George said. "Somebody's killed her. Somebody's killed my wife."

Malone caught his beefy lower lip in his teeth, and said nothing. Of all the people he knew, George and Kathy were two of the ones he'd liked the best. If Kathy was dead, then a little part of him had died too. Kathy. Lovely, gracious Kathy. . . .

At the top of the stairs, George

turned to the right and stopped before the second door. "In there, Malone," he said hoarsely.

Malone twisted the knob and stepped inside. It was a large room, bright and infinitely feminine. It was in perfect order, and even the bottles on Kathy's vanity seemed to have been arranged in some whimsical order of her own.

Malone took in the entire room at a glance. He turned quickly to George. "Where is she?"

"On — on the other side of the bed," George said. "On the floor."

Malone went around the bed fast. Kathy lay on her back, the blue-black waves of her long hair in contrast vividly with the smooth white arm thrown out behind her head. One slim ankle was crossed over the other, and above them her stockinged legs tapered up to swelling thighs. A sheet had been spread over the body from shoulders to hips, but it took Malone no second glance to know that, except for the sheet, and her shoes and stockings, she was completely naked.

She was beautiful in death. It was, Malone thought, almost as if she were sleeping. He put his hand over her heart and held it there until he was convinced.

He looked up at George Weston. Very softly, he said, "How?"

George had remained near the door, but now he closed it behind him and took two tentative steps toward Malone. "Her neck's broken," he said thickly.

Malone put his fingertips to the back of Kathy's head and moved them slowly downward. He felt the break, the small bump where there should be no bump.

He got to his feet and stood very still, looking at George.

"You touch her?"

"I put the sheet over her."

"And what else?"

"I straightened her head. It was all . . ." His shoulders slumped and he put a hand out to the foot of the bed as if for support. "I couldn't stand to see her look that way."

Malone nodded. "Sure, George," he said.

George turned and pulled the bench out from the vanity and sat down. Malone walked to the window and stood staring out into the night. He would have gone through a thousand hells to be able to help George Weston now. But there was nothing he could do for him, and nothing he could say to make it any easier for him.

George was speaking now, almost as if to himself. "I loved her. Nobody will ever know how much I loved her."

Malone cleared his throat. "George, isn't it about time we called the police?"

George nodded. "Yes. I guess so, Malone." His eyes were sick. "This was our anniversary. It was fifteen years today."

Malone felt an utter helplessness that was alien to him. In most situations, he knew what to do, and how

to do it. But not this time. His grief was not as great as George's, of course, but it was profound.

"I hate to ask this, George," he said gently. "But have you got any ideas? It had to be one of your guests. You know that."

George was silent a long moment. Then, "No, Malone. It couldn't have been. Everybody loved her. There's never been anybody like her, Malone. Everybody . . ."

Malone tried to get a stern tone into his voice, but he failed. His words came out as gently as before. "You found her without any clothes on? Where are they?"

"Under the bed," George said. "They were in a heap beside her, but I pushed them under the bed. I don't know why. I guess I just didn't want anybody to know what had happened to her."

Quickly then, Malone went around the bed once more and bent down. The dress Kathy had worn earlier was in tatters, and her underclothing had obviously been ripped from her body. Malone dropped them to the floor and went back to lean against the wall near George Weston.

"Killing her wasn't enough," George said. "They had to do *that*, too."

For the first time in several minutes, Malone felt as if he was capable of coherent thought.

"George," he said, "I'll promise you something. Except for you, no one thought more of Kathy than I did. I'm going to find out who killed

her, George — if it takes me the rest of my life."

"You can't bring her back," George said dully. "Nobody can do that."

"No. But we can find out who did it. It had to be somebody downstairs, George. Now, can you think of anyone who might have any reason at all to want to . . ." He paused. "Think hard, George."

George shook his head. "No. Nobody." His face was very white. "I can't stay in here any longer, Malone. I — I've got to have some air. I feel sick."

"Sure," Malone said. "We'll go down the back stairs."

As they walked between the trees in the huge back lawn, John J. Malone, for once, kept his silence. He was thinking back a good many years, back to the first time he had seen George and Kathy Weston.

There had been a carnival on the outskirts of Chicago that year, and one of the feature attractions was the Cage of Death. Malone had watched two young daredevils wheel a pair of motorcycles into a giant globe fashioned of steel mesh. He had been across the midway at the time, and it was not until he got much closer that he discovered one of the riders was a girl. Her companion had ridden his motorcycle in small circles around the bottom of the cage, until he had gained sufficient momentum to suspend him and his vehicle horizontally. And then, defying gravity, he had increased the

speed and looped-the-loop a dozen times.

Then the girl had done the same thing. And, at the climax, both riders were at the top of the mesh sphere one moment, and at the bottom the next, both of them looping-the-loop at the same time, and in opposite directions.

Malone had never seen anything like it. He waited around, and when the young riders came out, he told them so. That was the beginning, and Malone haunted the carny lot and the Cage of Death every night thereafter, until the carnival moved to the next town. He and the two young riders — George and Kathy — had become friends instantly. The next year, Malone had renewed the friendship. He had been watching them the night they collided head-on at the very top of the cage. . . .

Kathy had suffered a broken arm and severe bruises, and that was all. But George had been badly mangled. During the four days when his chance of life was fifty-fifty, after the long sessions of surgery, Malone had haunted the hospital just as he had the carny lot.

He remembered the way George had tried to smile when he told him he was all right now, but that he could never ride again, and the way Kathy had cried when George said that.

But they had saved a good deal of money, and George had started dabbling in Chicago real estate. Now,

on their fifteenth wedding anniversary, they were in the upper income bracket.

They'd been one of the happiest, most devoted couples Malone had ever known. They'd kept close touch with him, and he with them, and his one sure cure for the blues was an evening with George and Kathy.

Malone glanced sideways at George. "You feel like going back now?"

"In a minute," George said.

"We've got to call the police."

"Yes, I know. In just a minute."

"About these guests of yours," Malone said. "I got their first names when you introduced me, and that's about all. Give me a quick run-down on them."

George stopped walking. He sat down on a stone bench and shook a cigarette out of a crumpled pack. He rolled it around in his fingers absently, then suddenly broke it in two and flicked it away.

"There are four guys and three women in there," Malone said. "Who are they, and *what* are they?"

"None of them did it," George said.

"Never mind. What about them?"

"There's Eddie Marcheck. He's the short one with the crew cut. He was a talker with the carny at the same time we were with it. His wife is the tall blonde. The guy with the freckles is Del Esterly. He's in insurance. He and his wife — that's the girl with the glasses — have an

agency." He shook his head. "But there's no point in this, Malone. None of them —"

"Go on," Malone told him.

"I don't feel much like talking."

"I know, and I'm sorry. But this is important. What about the others?"

"Well, the other couple are Mark and Jen Stevens. They're neighbors, and Mark is sales manager for a sporting goods firm down near the Loop."

George's voice was thin and tired, and Malone was beginning to dislike himself a little for putting him through the paces at a time like this. But — it had to be.

"And the solo guy?" he asked. "Who's he?"

George hesitated a moment. When he spoke, his voice was scarcely audible. "His name's McJanet," he said. "Les McJanet. He's a guy I used to know — from school."

Malone took a fresh cigar from his pocket and began, very slowly, to unwrap it, his eyes on George Weston. There had been a subtle change in George's voice when he spoke of McJanet, something quite apart from its sudden softness. Malone put the cigar in his mouth, unlit. Around it, he said, "Is there something special about this guy McJanet?"

"No. Why?"

"I think there is," Malone said. "I think there's something special about him. What is it?"

George looked up at Malone, and

then moved away again hesitantly.

"He's an ex-con. He's out on parole now. I hadn't seen him in years, and then, this afternoon, I ran into him on State Street. I invited him to our anniversary party. He said he'd come, but that there was something he wanted me to know first."

Malone bit the tip from his cigar and spat it out and glanced toward the house. "And that's when he told you about being out on parole?"

George nodded. "I told him it didn't make any difference. And it didn't."

Malone stared up at the window of the bedroom where Kathy Weston lay with her neck broken and a sheet across her naked body.

"What was McJanet in for?"

George stood up and started walking back toward the house. Malone fell into step beside him.

"I didn't hear what you said," Malone prompted.

"Assault and rape," George said. "He swore it was a frame-up."

"And you believed him?"

"Yes, I believed him. I've known him most of my life. He couldn't do anything like that." His tone was flat. "And now let me alone, Malone."

Malone drew in deeply on his cigar and said nothing.

They went in through the side door, and George started walking through the hallway to the living room. "Everybody seems to be in the kitchen," he said. "I'm going to

try to call the police right now.”

“Wait a minute,” Malone said. “I want to take one more look in that room.”

“Why?”

“Just a hunch. Maybe we can save the police a little work.”

George turned to look at him. His eyes were level, his voice steady. “It isn’t McJanet, and it isn’t anyone else here. I know you think so, but you’re wrong. Kathy went upstairs for a minute, and somebody had either sneaked in and was in the bedroom, or they got in through the side entrance while she was up there. I know that —”

“You don’t know anything,” Malone said sharply. “You’re in something pretty close to shock, and you can’t even think. It was somebody at this party, and I know it, even if you don’t.”

He caught himself. This was a hell of a way to talk to a good friend, a man whose wife had just been murdered. He knew how much George had always worshipped Kathy, how he had worked like a dog to build up his real estate business. And he knew, beyond any question, that George had never so much as looked at another woman — no more than Kathy had looked at another man. George had loved his wife with an intensity that was rare in Malone’s experience, and *worshipped* was the only word to describe the way he’d felt about her.

He had loved her so much that her death had temporarily deranged

him. All this talk about innocent guests came from the part of George’s mind that was trying desperately to catch on to something, anything, that it could deny. His mind couldn’t deny Kathy’s death, but the need for denial was so great that George had somehow channeled it toward something else.

Malone tried to manage a grin for his friend, but it wouldn’t stay on his lips. If I’d told George that this wasn’t Chicago, instead of that one of his guests had murdered his wife, Malone thought, he’d have denied *that* too. Right now, his mind can’t accept things. The poor lug. . . .

George studied Malone’s face a moment, his eyes cloudy and remote. He shrugged. “All right, Malone.” He turned and started up the back stairs. “But I can’t go in. I —”

“I know,” Malone said. “It’ll only take me a minute — and then we’ll call the cops.”

At the door to Kathy’s bedroom, George suddenly put his hands up to his face, his head bent, his shoulders shaking.

It hurt Malone to see George this way, but there was nothing he could do.

“I — I think I’m going to be sick,” George said. He turned in the direction of the bathroom and half ran toward it.

Malone wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and went into the bedroom. From the direction of the bathroom, he

could hear George Weston being very sick. He closed the bedroom door and walked slowly around the bed and stood looking down at Kathy.

Any one of those men down there could have done it, he thought. Not the women, because only a man could break someone's neck quickly enough to avoid getting clawed and bitten. It took a lot of strength to break a neck; a hell of a lot of strength.

And motive? That would come out later. It always did. Right now he wanted the personal satisfaction of having a hand in finding the man who had killed a woman he loved dearly. His own deep reaction — the thing George was going through now — would come later, he knew.

He circled the room several times, and each time his eyes missed nothing. His brain was in high gear now, and his thoughts came quickly and clearly, the way they had before in similar situations. He looked for the obvious thing, the thing that seemed slightly wrong somehow. There was nothing. He came back to the sheet-covered body, and then, with the strongest reluctance he had ever felt toward anything, he bent and pulled away the sheet.

He looked down at Kathy Weston a full minute, his eyes covering every line and curve of her body. He stood wholly without movement, his face as devoid of expression as if it had been a wooden mask.

But, inside him, deep in the pit

of his stomach, something tightened and drew into a hard, pulsing knot. And then, carefully, and with infinite gentleness, he drew the sheet back across Kathy's body and left the bedroom.

He walked to the bathroom. The door was open, and George Weston was not inside. Malone went to the stairway and down the stairs to the living room.

The party was gay no longer. Everyone was in the living room, and all were watching George Weston at the telephone. A quick glance at their faces told Malone that they knew what had happened, that George had told them. George put the phone down and looked at Malone. "I've just called the police," he said.

Malone nodded. He took a folder of matches from his pocket and lit his cigar. "Maybe it's just as well, George. A few minutes more, either way, wouldn't make any difference."

"I got to thinking," George said. "Up there in the bathroom. I guess you were right when you said I couldn't think, before." He glanced quickly toward a broad-shouldered man, in his middle thirties, with thinning blond hair and a pinched, sallow face. "And I guess you were right in saying there was something special about Les McJanet. It must have been him, Malone. He just got out of prison for doing almost the same thing he did to Kathy."

The blond man lunged forward, but two of the other men caught

his arms and held him. "What the hell *is* this?" Les McJanet shouted. "What are you trying to pull, Weston?"

Malone put his cigar down in a tray. If there was going to be action, he wanted no tobacco coals in the air.

"It wasn't too difficult to kill Kathy," Malone said. "With people going upstairs to the bathroom, and one thing and another, it wasn't hard to get to Kathy and break her neck and get down again without being missed."

"Goddam it!" Les McJanet yelled. "Let go of me!"

"In just a moment," Malone said. "When you're calmer." He looked around at the others. No one moved or spoke. All eyes were upon him. He turned back toward George Weston. "You can't go through with it, George, and you know it. You're not made that way. I don't know exactly when you decided to kill Kathy, but it must have been just a few seconds after you discovered she was going to have a baby."

George's eyes widened almost imperceptibly. "A — a baby?"

Malone nodded. This was hurting him; this was tearing his heart out. "Yes, George," he said. "A baby. You couldn't stand it. You really loved Kathy, George. You practically lived for her. You felt you had to kill her, and the child too."

For the space of ten heartbeats, George Weston's eyes stayed locked with Malone's — and then George looked away. His whole body seemed

to slump. His head drooped.

"You know you can't go through with it, George," Malone said. "You thought you could, but you can't."

George wet his lips, and now his face had gone slack and his eyes were sick again.

Malone stood very still, waiting.

"Yes," George whispered. "Yes. That's the way it was. I killed her . . . and I thought I could make it look like Les . . . but I can't. The minute I knew Kathy was dead, I didn't care about anything else. She's dead." His voice was slowly gaining strength. "And now I want to die, too. Do you hear? I *want* to."

Malone nodded to the two men holding Les McJanet. "Let him go," he said. McJanet took a step backward, gazing in stunned horror at his lifelong friend.

Out in the street, a car braked to a fast stop in front of the house.

"That would be the police," Malone said.

"I want to die," George Weston shouted. "*I want to.*"

"No, George," Malone told him. "You do now, but time will change that. You wanted to die a long time ago, too, as I remember." He looked away from George's tortured face. "Don't worry too much about dying. I've saved worse than you from the death house — and I can do it again. Things will be bad, George — but not that bad."

There was a heavy knock on the door, a heavy, official knock.

Les McJanet suddenly found his voice. "But how — how'd you know Kathy was — was going to have a baby?"

"I saw her, McJanet. Her breasts, the slight swell of her stomach — not enough to show when she was dressed — but the signs were unmistakable. She was going to have a baby, all right."

"But why should George . . . ? I mean . . . what's wrong with a

baby? Why should he kill. . . ?"

"George used to ride a motorcycle in a big cage with a carnival," Malone said softly. "One day he had an accident. It was a bad accident, the way it can be when a motorcycle almost rips you down the middle."

Malone whirled and jerked open the door for the police.

"You see," Malone went on, "being a father was one thing George Weston could never do."





The store had given the redhead ten thousand dollars worth of jewelry, and now they wanted it returned. Scott Jordan had to take it from there.

The Mourning After

BY HAROLD Q. MASUR

ON FIFTH AVENUE it's Tiffany's or Cartier's. But they haven't got all the carriage trade sewed up. There's Sutro's on Madison. Not quite as large, but just as elegant, with a liveried doorman at the entrance.

He bowed and smiled and pulled the heavy plate-glass door wide open.

A floorwalker in morning coat and oxford trousers showed me his teeth. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Mrs. Brownlee," I said.

His deference expanded. You might think I had asked for the Duchess of Luxemburg. "The elevator on your left, sir. Third floor."

He gave me a personal convoy past the blond wood display counters

in front of which set gracefully carved chairs with black patent leather seats. The rose-colored broadloom underfoot was soft as grass. The indirect lighting was subdued and easy on the eyes.

The sales personnel were distinguished-looking and impeccably garbed, supplied with smooth-writing fountain pens to facilitate the writing of checks, on the theory that few people carried enough cash to pay for the original designs executed by Sutro's own artisans.

An angular female sat at a reception desk on the third floor. She raised an inquiring eyebrow as I approached.

"Mrs. Brownlee," I said.

"Have you an appointment?"

"At two o'clock."

She checked her wrist watch and looked up disapprovingly. "It's five after."

"Sorry," I said. "It's that Turkish ambassador. He always dawdles over his schnapps."

She glared at me. "Your name, please."

"Jordan," I said. "Scott Jordan."

She plugged into a small PBX and spoke my name, listened, got me the green light, and pointed to a door against the far wall.

It was quite an office, very sumptuous, with a wide expanse of desk fashioned out of English walnut and polished like a mirror. A woman stood up from behind the desk. "Scott Jordan," she said warmly, and came around to greet me.

"Hello, Eve."

At forty, Eve Brownlee was a tall, sinewy, well-nourished woman with dark hair pulled severely back from a pale forehead. In a tailored suit, with the bloom of youth gone, she could still activate the hormones, and there was no doubt that she had a lot of enthusiastic mileage left.

She owned Sutro's. She inherited the establishment when her first husband, Jacques Sutro, carelessly stepped out into the path of a Fifth Avenue bus. She had mourned briefly and then gone to work learning the business.

I had met her a year ago in Mexico, while her second husband, Charles Brownlee, was on a fishing

trip. They had been secretly married, she confided, and were spending their honeymoon. When she called me this morning I had no idea what was on her mind.

She got me seated and came straight to the point. "You're still practicing law, I suppose?"

"Vigorously."

"Can you handle a problem for us?"

I shrugged noncommittally. "Depends on the problem."

"Have you ever heard of Joyce Arnold?"

I thought and shook my head.

"Then let me enlighten you." Eve put her fingertips together. "Joyce Arnold is a character. Good family and good background. Her father is in the diplomatic service, vice-consul somewhere in the Balkans. But the girl never settled down. She was briefly headed for a career. Studied law and even practiced for a time. She was married twice and divorced twice. About a month ago she came into the store and —"

Eve glanced up as the door opened.

A man's voice spoke apologetically. "Didn't know you had company, Eve. I'm sorry."

"That's all right, Charles. I want you to meet Scott Jordan, the attorney I told you about. This is my husband, Charles Brownlee."

I saw a tall gent with an aristocratic air, straight and thin, with a touch of gray at the temples. He reached for my hand with a grip like

a pipefitter in good shape. Brownlee had been employed at Sutro's for several years before marrying the boss. Marriage had moved him up the ladder. He was general manager now.

Eve said, "I was just telling Scott about Joyce Arnold."

He looked at her with a pained expression, frowning. "You're not really going to sue that girl, are you, Eve?"

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not sure it's the wise thing to do."

"Look, Charles, we've got to run this firm on a business basis, not as a philanthropic institution."

He shook his head stubbornly. "But there must be some other method."

"What, for instance?"

"Give me time and I'll think of one."

"Time? Haven't we waited long enough? Suppose we let Scott decide." She appealed to me. "Here's the situation. It's simple enough. As I was saying, Joyce Arnold came into the store some time ago, six weeks to be exact. She was looking for a piece of jewelry. Nothing pleased her until she saw a certain pin, rather expensive, diamonds and emeralds, but she couldn't make up her mind, so Charles let her take it home, sort of on consignment. We do that with certain customers. Gives them a chance to reach a definite decision. That was six weeks ago. The pin is worth ten thousand dollars. She has

neither paid for it nor returned it."

"Have you communicated with her?"

"By mail and telephone. She ignores the letters and acts evasive on the telephone. It's a ridiculous situation and I can't understand it at all," Eve said indignantly.

"Did she sign a receipt?"

"Of course."

I took it from her hand and looked it over. Everything was in order, ironclad and legal.

Brownlee cleared his throat. "What do you suggest, counselor?"

"You have one of two remedies. An action to make her pay or an action to recover the merchandise. Providing you want to sue."

Eve looked first at her husband, then at me. "Is there any other way, Scott?"

"Maybe we can settle out of court. I usually try to do that first anyway."

"You have our authorization."

"That all right with you, Mr. Brownlee?"

"Er — yes," he said absently. "Whatever you think best."

"Then it's settled."

We exchanged some small talk, shook hands all around, and I left.

Joyce Arnold lived in Gracie Square. The building was old, but well-kept and respectable. I got her apartment from the row of mail boxes and took the self-service elevator to the fourth floor.

I had a hunch. My hunch said

that Joyce Arnold no longer had the pin, that it was in hock, that she couldn't raise the money to redeem it, and that she was stalling for time.

I found the number and rang the bell.

The door opened. She stood, blocking the threshold, not too tall, not too short, just right, gorgeously bunched and full of electricity. Her face was oval-shaped and olive-skinned, with large moist expressive eyes under flaring brows. Bronzed hair lounged softly around her shoulders. Her lips were cherry-red, luscious and desirable. The rest of her looked damned good too.

On business calls, I'm usually immune. But this was too much for me. My chest was thumping.

"Miss Arnold?" I said.

"Yes."

"The name is Jordan — Scott Jordan. I'd like to talk to you. I'm an attorney."

"Attorney for whom?"

"Sutro's."

I had my foot wedged in to prevent the slamming door from flattening my nose. It didn't slam and I got my first surprise of the afternoon. She smiled. It was a smile that promised a man the world, but he'd probably have to pay for it at current real estate values.

She stepped aside. "Come in, won't you?"

I went through a foyer and down two steps into a sunken living room. Upholstery on the love seat had a busy circus design. The wingback

chairs were peppermint-striped in green and red. Plaster of Paris animals stood, sat, and reclined from every horizontal shelf in the place.

Joyce Arnold sank back into a nest of pillows on the love seat and tucked her legs up under her. "I've read about you, Mr. Jordan. This is a pleasure, indeed. I'm delighted." She patted the seat beside her. "Sit down."

The space was just wide enough for a golf stick. I took a deep breath and squeezed in. It reminded me of the subway at rush hours. My pulse began to knock erratically.

First honors to Miss Arnold.

Her strategy was effective. How can you think straight against the pressure of molded thigh and the swirling fragrance of recently shampooed hair and sea-blue eyes deep enough to drown in?

"You say you're from Sutro's?" The diction was Knob Hill but the tone was Basin Street.

"That's right," I said.

"A lovely store."

"Yes, ma'am."

I was real bright this afternoon. I shook my head. I avoided her eyes. I put some steel into my voice.

"I understand you were a lawyer once, Miss Arnold."

"Still am. I've never been disbarred. Just inactive."

It was a big mistake. She never should have given it up. Only a jury of blind octogenarians with muscular atrophy would decide a case against her.

"Then you must know something about the law," I told her. "There are certain tenets concerning fraud, illegal possession, and unjust enrichment. You know why I'm here. About that pin you took from Sutro's. It doesn't belong to you. Not yet. Title remains vested in Sutro's until it's paid for. They are very adamant. They believe you've had enough time to decide. They want their money or their pin. The management has empowered me to take whatever steps I find necessary to accomplish that end."

"Did Charles Brownlee send you here?"

"The idea was Mrs. Brownlee's."

"So they're going to sue," she said. "I can't believe it."

"Come now, Miss Arnold," I said. "Six weeks is a long time. Ten thousand dollars is a lot of money. A thing like this can't go on indefinitely. They're afraid you'll get squatter's rights. Certainly you've had enough time to make up your mind."

"I have, Mr. Jordan." She nodded decisively. "I'm going to keep the pin."

"Good," I said. "Suppose you make out a check and give it to me."

She sniffed. "I'll have to sell some stock and make a deposit. They'll have a check in the mail not later than tomorrow afternoon."

"That's a promise?"

"Yes."

I held out my hand. "Shall we seal it?"

It wasn't her way of closing a deal. She had other ideas. She turned sideways and tilted back into my arms. Her fingers squirmed along the back of my neck, pulling me close. Her lips were cushion-soft and pouting. I didn't have to move more than half a millimeter to make contact.

I held back a moment. Nothing here seemed disloyal to my clients. She had promised to pay. The case was closed. Ostensibly, I was on my own.

I moved the half a millimeter. It was something. Have you ever been caught in the propwash of a B-29? Her mouth opened on mine, hungry and lingering. Her fingernails gouged into the nape of my neck. She made a small whimpering savage noise and the thing got out of hand. I felt myself spinning and whirling into a vortex that left me dizzy and breathless.

The spinning stopped, and only a white heat remained, and it tried to burn a hole in the pit of my stomach. The heat moved to her mouth then, and her lips were on fire, and she squirmed closer in my arms, pressing the length of her body against mine. In less than ten seconds, the whole room was a blazing holocaust and we were in the middle of it, and we didn't give one little damn.

We rested for a while after that and we didn't say much. There wasn't much else we could say. And then that hungry look came into her eyes again, and she moved closer to

me again, and I was getting ready for another three-alarm, because these were fires I liked.

So the damn doorbell picked that precise moment to start ringing.

At first, she ignored it. But an insistent finger kept the button depressed. It took will-power, but I finally got her disengaged. She moved away from me and stood up, straightening her dress. Her eyes were muddy and her lipstick smeared. When her breathing slowed down she said, "Don't go way now," and disappeared into the foyer.

I heard the door open. I heard her gasp of surprise. "Gladys!"

The visitor's voice was harsh and strained. "I must speak to you, Joyce."

"Some other time, Gladys. I'm very busy. Can we have cocktails tomorrow at —"

"No. It won't wait. I have to see you now."

The voice had resolution and inflexibility. I knew the visitor was coming in. I felt foolish sitting there with lip-rouge all over my face. I got out of the love seat and through a swinging door into a tiny kitchen just as Joyce Arnold backed up into the living room. I kept the door open a quarter of an inch.

No wonder Joyce had backed up. Gladys had both the vigor and the physique. She was built like one of those showgirls Ziegfeld used to hire in the old days to stand around in a tassel and smile for the stimulation of jaded executives and visiting fire-

men. A tall, statuesque, peroxide blonde, full blown, pneumatic and boiling mad.

She put her hands on her hips and made her lips thin. Her eyes were ominous. "You listen to me, Joyce, and get this straight. I'm warning you. Stay away from Matt. Understand? Stay away from Matt."

"What's the matter with you?"

"He's my husband and he's going to stay my husband."

"Who wants him?"

"You do. You've been seeing him."

Joyce managed a laugh. "You've got the wrong number, Gladys. I wouldn't take Matt on a silver platter."

"Then why have you seen him?"

"Business. Strictly business. Matt Frost and I were once associated, weren't we?"

"You mean you worked for him."

I thought, Matt Frost. That would be Mathew B. (for Blackstone) Frost. A well-known legal-beagle with offices on Foley Square. A short bald pudgy specimen with a devious brain and an active practice in matrimonial actions.

I saw the peroxide blonde take a threatening step. "This is my last warning, Joyce. If you don't leave him alone, so help me, I'll kill you."

Joyce Arnold held her ground. "He's all yours. I never wanted him and I don't want him now. Will you please leave?"

Gladys concentrated a glare of pure unadulterated hatred. If looks could kill, Joyce would have been

horizontal on the carpet, stone cold dead. The blonde turned suddenly and marched through the foyer. The whole apartment trembled with the impact of the door when it slammed shut.

I stepped out of the kitchen.

Joyce heard me. "Oh, there you are." She dropped onto the love seat, sighing. "Come over and sit down."

Damned if she didn't want to resume where we'd left off as if nothing had happened.

I lit a cigarette. "That blonde," I said, "was really sore."

"You got an earful, didn't you?"

"How could I help it?"

"Well, she was mistaken."

I shook my head. "First time I ever heard of two women fighting over Mathew Blackstone Frost."

She narrowed her eyes. "You know Matt Frost?"

"Business-wise, not socially."

Joyce bent over and reached for a box of cigarettes on the coffee table. I struck a match and brought the flame close. She filled her lungs with smoke and kept it there. Then she leaned back and half closed her eyes. "Know who Gladys used to be?" she asked.

"Who?"

"The first Mrs. Charles Brownlee."

I almost dropped my cigarette. "You don't say."

"We got her the divorce. I was associated with Matt when he handled the case."

"So the lawyer married his client," I said.

"It's not the first time."

"She had blood in her eyes. Better watch out, Joyce."

She shrugged indifferently. Twin streams of smoke leaked through her nostrils. "I'm not worried. Come over here and sit down."

I looked at my watch and started to get up. "By God, it's late," I said, "and I've got an appointment with a judge."

She was pouting. "You really have to go?"

"It's very important."

"Will I see you again?"

"Sure."

"Tonight?"

"Why not."

"Come for supper," she said. "You'd be surprised. I can cook."

You're always cooking, I thought. "It's a date," I said.

She got up and moved to a liquor cabinet. "One for the road?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Thanks just the same."

She was trying her luck on a shot of Black Horse when I left. Halfway down the hall I thought of something and tiptoed back. Her voice came through in a monologue. She was talking to someone on the telephone.

"... it's Eve Brownlee, I tell you. She's impatient. I promised the lawyer I'd send a check. We'll have to figure something, Matt. Can I see you?" A pause. "Yes, I'll be here

all afternoon if you call back."

I didn't hear the handset click into its cradle. But the monologue was suspended. I hurried to the elevator.

I called Sutro's from my office. "Eve," I said, "I spoke to Joyce Arnold. She promised to mail us a check tomorrow afternoon."

"Scott, you're a genius."

"Hold on," I said. "She made the promise, not me. I don't know if she'll keep her word."

"And if she doesn't?"

"Then we'll sue."

"It's in your hands, Scott."

"Good enough."

I stayed at my desk and worked all afternoon, correcting syntax on a brief for the Appellate Division. Then I went home for a shave, a shower, and a complete change. At seven o'clock I headed for Gracie Square.

The self-service elevator took me up.

I put my finger on the buzzer. She was probably in the tiny kitchen. Those pressure cookers usually make a lot of noise. Nobody answered. I rattled the knob and the door swung open easily.

I went in and I saw her.

No wonder she couldn't hear me. She was through hearing anything, ever again. The one bullet was enough. It had knocked in the left temple and she sat sprawled awkwardly in the peppermint-striped chair. Her wide open eyes were fixed

on the high ceiling, blank and glassy.

Her body looked unreal. Too theatrical. As if it were planned for effect.

I stood there, rooted, impaled to the floor. For once I was really shocked.

Eight thousand homicides every year. You read about them in the papers. But you feel nothing, neither pity nor shock. The victims are merely names, unfamiliar ciphers. It's different when you've known a girl, held her in your arms, felt her heart beating.

Joyce Arnold had come a long way. I knew she'd hurried getting there. Was it worth the effort?

What had she done? Taken another woman's husband? Tried to make an easy buck? Maybe it was a combination of both.

My lips were cotton dry as I reached for the phone and called Headquarters. Detective-lieutenant John Nola was the man I wanted. Sometimes he knew just what to do.

"Stay there," he told me grimly. "You know the procedure."

I knew what he meant. He meant: Hands off. This is murder and out of your jurisdiction. Keep your nose clean. Don't get a finger caught.

I knew what he meant all right. So I started to search. I wanted to be sure we got a receipt for a diamond pin if it was here anywhere. Not that I didn't trust the cops. But there's bound to be one rotten apple in a whole barrel. One cop with an itchy palm. I looked in the knee-hole desk,

in the closets, in the bureau drawers. For a while I thought it was gone.

I found the envelope hidden under a tangle of nylon hosiery and undergarments. The flap was open and I looked inside.

It held some newsprint and a photostat.

The newsprint was a page torn out of the Law Journal and dated April 1st. A pencil mark encircled an item. It stated that an interlocutory decree had been entered in the divorce action of Brownlee vs Brownlee. The article went on in dry legal phraseology.

That was the split, I guessed, between Gladys and Charles.

The photostat was a copy of the marriage certificate issued to Charles Brownlee and Eve Sutro on June 20th in Gretna Green. It showed that a ceremony had been performed by a Justice of the Peace the same day.

I looked them over, thinking hard. The answers hit me like a Mack truck. I got out of there as fast as I could.

A police siren came wailing through the night as I reached the corner. Brakes squealed in protest. I didn't wait around.

I stepped hurriedly into the drug store and thumbed through the telephone directory. It supplied the home address of Gladys and Mathew B. Frost.

They lived on Park Avenue, only five blocks away. I went up there and I pushed the button. A tiny

French maid with a capricious smile opened the door and twinkled. "Yes, m'sieu?"

"Mrs. Frost, please."

"She ees not home."

"Mr. Frost?"

"He ees with her. Can I so something for you, m'sieu?"

She sure could, but not now. Not if she was going to do it right.

I headed over to the West Side. To Riverside Drive and one of those concrete monoliths with an acre of window panes facing the Hudson. Charles and Eve Brownlee had a terrace apartment high up in the north tower.

They were home, dining at opposite ends of a long table under a glittering chandelier. Everything had been cleared away except a silver coffee service.

Eve delicately touched a napkin to a corner of her mouth. "Cup of coffee, Scott? Sorry we can't offer you any dessert. Charles and I are on a diet."

"Nothing, thanks," I said.

Charles Brownlee patted his satisfied stomach. "Eve tells me you've settled the case, counselor. Extraordinary. With a talent like that you ought to run a collection agency." He took a sip of coffee. "You say we can expect our money tomorrow or the day after?"

"Not any more," I said. "You'll have to wait."

"But I thought . . ." He looked at his wife with a puzzled expression

and then came back to me. "Wait for what?"

"For her estate to be settled."

"Estate?"

"That's right. She's dead."

They goggled at me, their eyes round and stunned. Eve gasped. "What . . ."

"Shot," I said, "in the head. And very very dead."

Charles Brownlee got his mouth closed.

"When?"

I stood up and looked down at him. "You tell me."

"I — *what's that?*"

"You tell me," I said. "When was she killed?"

A muscle jumped in his throat. The iron gray brows came together in a wavering line over the bridge of his jutting nose.

He said hoarsely, "I'm afraid I don't understand what you're talking about."

"Like hell you don't!" I said. "Maybe you didn't check the time on your watch, but you can make a pretty good guess. Go ahead and try."

He didn't say a word. His throat seemed stuck. There was a sudden withdrawal reflected in the opaque shine of his eyes. They seemed to go dead and dull.

"Go on, Brownlee," I said. "Tell us. When did you put that bullet through her head?"

"No!" Eve half screamed. She was out of her chair, fingers clutching her throat, pop-eyed with fear.

"What in the world are you trying to say?"

I spoke to her, but my eyes stayed on him.

"It was I who found her, Eve. Dead in her own apartment. I disobeyed police orders, searching for the pin. I found something else instead. A clipping from the Law Journal with the date of his interlocutory decree from Gladys. April 1st."

Brownlee found his tongue. "So what?"

"There was another paper," I told him. "It showed that you were married to Eve on June 15th."

He snorted. "Everybody knows that."

"I'm afraid not. The fact is you kept your marriage secret. I met Eve in Mexico and she told me. A good thing, too, or you might have landed in jail."

"Jail?" Eve's voice was a shredded whisper, barely audible. Her face was drawn.

"Exactly. It takes ninety days for an interlocutory decree to become final in this state. But our friend here couldn't wait. He was taking no chances. You were ready to marry him and he struck while the iron was hot. He took you off to Maryland and an obscure Justice of the Peace. It was his idea to keep it a secret, wasn't it, Eve?"

I could tell from her expression it was true. Her face was lined and old. Her usual poise was completely gone.

"He failed to comply with the law," I said. "A man is not fully divorced until his decree is final. That made his second marriage illegal and exposed him to a charge of bigamy."

Eve steadied herself against a chair. She could barely get the words out. "You say he killed Joyce. Why would he do that?"

"Because she suspected and made it her business to collect the evidence. Brownlee was a director of Sutro's now and ripe for a showdown. She had some help, I'll bet, from Mathew Frost. I think Frost suggested the jewelry angle. It was a little neater than outright blackmail. They were sure Brownlee would never really go after the money. Joyce Arnold had braced him and showed him her ace in the hole. That's why he was so reluctant to sue. They felt he'd pay the bill himself first."

Eve looked as if she were bleeding to death inside. "I — I can't believe it . . ."

"Look at him," I said. "The guilt is there in his face, written for anyone to see. My guess is he just didn't have enough cash on hand to pay the tab. I'm sorry, Eve, but it was you who brought matters to a head by calling me in on the case. Charles couldn't pay and Joyce wouldn't. He knew she'd spill the story if we pressed her. There was only one way out. Joyce had to die. That's why he went to see her this afternoon. To eliminate a threat that could topple

him from his nice new position. After all, he might inherit the store someday."

Brownlee's temples were shining, wet with moisture.

"You'll never be able to prove it," he said hoarsely.

"Maybe not," I said. "Providing nobody knows you left the store. Providing nobody saw you in the vicinity of Miss Arnold's apartment. Although the cops are pretty thorough. They'll check and recheck for witnesses. And how about the gun? Did you get rid of it, Brownlee? If it's hidden here in the apartment, they'll find it. They know how to take a place apart piece by piece. You won't —"

That tore it. He knew when the game was lost. He heaved from the table, moving with incredible speed, and lunged frantically through the door.

I took after him. He raced down the corridor and whirled into another room. The door slammed shut as I landed against it. A key turned in the lock.

"Brownlee!" I yelled, banging against it with my fist. Inside a drawer pulled open. I backed up and lunged, striking hard with my shoulder. The wood held, but it sprang the lock.

I tumbled through as the door flew back.

He had the gun out now. I stopped short when I saw it and tried to reverse my field. But it wasn't revenge he was after. It was escape.

His wild eyes covered the room frantically, like a cornered animal looking for a hole in the woodwork. In just a few seconds he would begin to realize where his escape lay, and then the gun would begin blasting at me.

I didn't care to wait that long. I threw a long flying tackle at him that brought him down like a broken stick. He tried to bring the gun up, but his jaw collided with my bunched

fist, and his hand opened, dropping the gun onto the floor.

His mouth opened, too, wide, and he lay stretched out like a Maltese Cross, as silent as a snuffed out candle.

I stood up, and then looked down at him, relaxed now in unconsciousness. I thought briefly of the agony a trial would cause Eve, and I almost wanted to pick up the gun and save the state an expense.

It took a lot of effort to turn away.



Everybody's Watching Me

BY MICKEY SPILLANE

Vetter! This is the name hiding an unknown face — a name that has young Joe Boyle serving as decoy in a dangerous game of death.

What has happened before: PART III

When young Joe Boyle delivers a note to Mark Renzo, local big-time racketeer, he is beaten unmercifully and tossed into the gutter, with the warning that he'll be watched until Vetter contacts him again. Vetter is the signature on the note reading, "Cooley is dead. Now, my fine fat louse, I'm going to spill your guts all over your own floor." With the help of Helen Troy, featured dancer at Renzo's club, Joe goes to police captain Gerot who tells them Vetter is a mystery man friend of Cooley, and responsible for the death of many hoodlums. But nothing more than that is known about him. Bucky Edwards, Joe's newspaperman friend, opines that if Vetter doesn't get Renzo, Renzo will emerge stronger than ever. When Helen and Joe go back to her apartment, they are confronted by Johnny, Renzo's hired gun, who is ready to beat Joe again as insurance that he will lead them to Vetter. Joe beats him instead and sends him back to Renzo, leaving Helen's apartment at midnight. He gets picked up by the men of another local racketeer, Phil Carboy, and is taken to the West Side leader's place. Carboy gives Joe money to finger Vetter when Vetter contacts him again. The plan is a simple one. He will signal Carboy's men by blowing his nose with a red

(contd)



A NEW MYSTERY THRILLER • IN FOUR PARTS

handkerchief when Vetter appears. They drive Joe back to his room where he gets a visitor from the police, Detective Sergeant Gonzales, who is as anxious to get Vetter as Renzo and Carboy are. Joe leaves later to see Helen, gives her money to leave Renzo, and then tells her how he's beginning to feel about her. Bucky Edwards tells Joe that maybe Cooley was rubbed for knowing too much about the local gang setup, and Joe heads for the refuge of a movie, where he can sit safely in the darkness and puzzle out his next move.

AT ELEVEN-FIFTEEN the feature wound up and I started back outside. In the glass reflection of the lobby door I saw somebody behind me but I didn't look back. There could have been one more in the crowd that was around the entrance outside. Maybe two. Nobody seemed to pay any attention to me and I didn't care if they did or not.

I waited for a Main Street bus, took it down about a half mile, got off at the darkened supermarket and started up the road. You get the creeps in places like that. It was an area where some optimist had started a factory and ran it until the swamp crept in. When the footings gave and the walls cracked, they moved out, and now the black skeletons of the buildings were all that were left, with gaping holes for eyes and a mouth that seemed to breathe out a fetid swamp odor. But there were still people there. The dozen or so company houses that were propped against the invading swamp showed dull yellow lights, and the garbage smell of unwanted humanity fought the swamp odor. You could hear them, too, knowing that they watched you from the shadows of their porches. You could feel them stirring in their

jungle shacks and catch the pungency of the alcohol they brewed out of anything they could find.

There was a low moan of a train from the south side and its single eye picked out the trestle across the bay and followed it. The freight lumbered up, slowed for the curve that ran through the swamps and I heard the bindle stiffs yelling as they hopped off, looking for the single hard topped road that took them to their quarters for the night.

The circus sign was on the board fence. In the darkness it was nothing but a bleached white square, but when I lit a cigarette I could see the faint orange impressions that used to be supposedly wild animals. The match went out and I lit another, got the smoke fired up and stood there a minute in the dark.

The voice was low. A soft, quiet voice more inaudible than a whisper. "One is back at the corner. There's another a hundred feet down."

"I know," I said.

"You got nerve."

"Let's not kid me. I got your message. Sorry I had to cut it short, but a pair of paid-for ears were listening in."

"Sorry Renzo gave you a hard time."

"So am I. The others did better by me."

Somebody coughed down the road and I flattened against the boards away from the white sign. It came again, further away this time and I felt better. I said, "What gives?"

"You had a cop at your place this morning."

"I spotted him."

"There's a regular parade behind you." A pause, then, "What did you tell them?"

I dragged in on the smoke, watched it curl up against the fence. "I told them he was big. Tough. I didn't see his face too well. What did you expect me to tell them?"

I had a feeling like he smiled.

"They aren't happy," he said.

I grinned too. "Vetter. They hate the name. It scares them." I pulled on the butt again. "It scares me too when I think of it too much."

"You don't have anything to worry about."

"Thanks."

"Keep playing it smart. You know what they're after?"

I nodded, even though he couldn't see me. "Cooley comes into it someplace. It was something he knew."

"Smart lad. I knew you were a smart lad the first time I saw you. Yes, it was Cooley."

"Who was he?" I asked.

Nothing for a moment. I could hear him breathing and his feet moved but that was all. The red light on the tail of the caboose winked at me and I knew it would have to be short.

"An adventurer, son. A romantic adventurer who went where the hunting was profitable and the odds long. He liked long odds. He found how they were slipping narcotics in through a new door and tapped them for a sweet haul. They say four million. It was a paid-for shipment and he got away with it. Now the boys have to make good."

The caboose was almost past now. He said, "I'll call you if I want you."

I flipped the butt away, watching it bounce sparks across the dirt. I went on a little bit further where I could watch the fires from the jungles and when I had enough of it I started back.

At the tree the guy who had been waiting there said, "You weren't thinking of hopping that freight, were you, kid?"

I didn't jump like I was supposed to. I said, "When I want to leave, I'll leave."

"Be sure to tell Mr. Carboy first, huh?"

"I'll tell him," I said.

He stayed there, not following me. I passed the buildings again, then felt better when I saw the single street light on the corner of Main. There was nobody there that I could see, but that didn't count. He was around someplace.

I had to wait ten minutes for a bus. It seemed longer than it was. I stayed drenched in the yellow light and thought of the voice behind the fence and what it had to say. When the bus pulled up I got on, stayed

there until I reached the lights again and got off. By that time a lot of things were making sense, falling into a recognizable pattern. I walked down the street to an all night drug store, had a drink at the counter then went back to the phone booth.

I dialed the police number and asked for Gonzales, Sergeant Gonzales. There was a series of clicks as the call was switched and the cop said, "Gonzales speaking."

"This is Joe, copper. Remember me?"

"Don't get too fresh, sonny," he said. His voice had a knife in it.

"Phil Carboy paid me some big money to finger Vetter. He's got men tailing me."

His pencil kept up a steady tapping against the side of the phone. Finally he said, "I was wondering when you'd call it in. You were real lucky, Joe. For a while I thought I was going to have to persuade you a little to cooperate. You were real lucky. Keep me posted."

I heard the click in my ear as he hung up and I spat out the things into the dead phone I felt like telling him to his face. Then I fished out another coin, dropped it in and dialed the same number. This time I asked for Captain Gerot. The guy at the switchboard said he had left about six but that he could probably be reached at his club. He gave me the number and I checked it through. The attendant who answered said he had left about an hour ago but would probably call back to see if there

were any messages for him and were there? I told him to get the number so I could put the call through myself and hung up.

It took me a little longer to find Bucky Edwards. He had stewed in his own juices too long and he was almost all gone. I said, "Bucky, I need something bad. I want Jack Cooley's last address. You remember that much?"

He hummed a little bit. "Rooming house. Between Wells and Capitol. It's all white, Joe. Only white house."

"Thanks, Bucky."

"You in trouble, Joe?"

"Not yet."

"You will be. Now you will be."

That was all. He put the phone back so easily I didn't hear it go. Damn, I thought, he knows the score but he won't talk. He's got all the scoop and he clams up.

I had another drink at the counter, picked up a deck of smokes and stood outside while I lit one. The street was quieting down. Both curbs were lined with parked heaps, dead things that rested until morning when they'd be whipped alive again.

Not all of them though. I was sure of that. I thought I caught a movement across the street in a doorway. It was hard to tell. I turned north and walked fast until I reached Benson Road, then cut down it to the used car lot.

Now was when they'd have a hard time. Now was when they were

playing games in my back yard and if they didn't know every inch of the way somebody was going to get hurt. They weren't kids, these guys. They had played the game themselves and they'd know all the angles. Almost all, anyway. They'd know when I tried to get out of the noose and as soon as they did, they'd quit playing and start working. They wouldn't break their necks sticking to a trail when they could bottle me up.

All I had to do was keep them from knowing for a while.

I crossed the lot, cutting through the parked cars, picked up the alley going back of the houses and stuck to the hedgerows until I was well down it. By that time I had a lead. If I looked back I'd spoil it so I didn't look back. I picked up another block at the fork in the alley, standing deliberately under the lone light at the end, not hurrying, so they could see me. I made it seem as though I were trying to pick out one of the houses in the darkness, and when I made up my mind, went through the gate in the fence.

After that I hurried. I picked up the short-cuts, made the street and crossed it between lights. I reached Main again, grabbed a cruising cab in the middle of the block, had him haul me across town to the docks and got out. It took fifteen minutes longer to reach the white house Bucky told me about. I grinned to myself and wondered if the boys were still watching the place they

thought I went into. Maybe it would be a little while before they figured the thing out.

It would be time enough.

The guy who answered the door was all wrapped up in a bathrobe, his hair stringing down his face. He squinted at me, reluctant to be polite, but not naturally tough enough to be anything else but. He said, "If you're looking for a room you'll have to come around in the morning. I'm sorry."

I showed him a bill with two numbers on it.

"Well. . . ."

"I don't want a room."

He looked at the bill again, then a quick flash of terror crossed his face. His eyes rounded open, looked at me hard, then dissolved into curiosity. "Come . . . in."

The door closed and he stepped around me into a small sitting room and snapped on a shaded desk lamp. His eyes went back down to the bill. I handed it over and watched it disappear into the bathrobe. "Yes?"

"Jack Cooley."

The words did something to his face. It showed terror again, but not as much as before.

"I really don't . . ."

"Forget the act. I'm not working for anybody in town. I was a friend of his."

This time he scowled, not believing me.

I said, "Maybe I don't look it, but I was."

"So? What is it you want?" He

licked his lips, seemed to tune his ears for some sound from upstairs. "Everybody's been here. Police, newspapers. Those . . . men from town. They all want something."

"Did Jack leave anything behind?"

"Sure. Clothes, letters, the usual junk. The police have all that."

"Did you get to see any of it?"

"Well . . . the letters were from dames. Nothing important."

I nodded, fished around for a question a second before I found one. "How about his habits?"

The guy shrugged. "He paid on time. Usually came in late and slept late. No dames in his room."

"That's all?"

He was getting edgy. "What else is there? I didn't go out with the guy. So now I know he spent plenty of nights in Renzo's joint. I hear talk. You want to know what kind of butts he smoked? Hobbies, maybe? Hell, what is there to tell? He goes out at night. Sometimes he goes fishing. Sometimes . . ."

"Where?" I interrupted.

"Where what?"

"Fishing."

"On one of his boats. He borrowed my stuff. He was fishing the day before he got bumped. Sometimes he'd slip me a ticket and I'd get away from the old lady."

"How do the boats operate?"

He shrugged again, pursing his mouth. "They go down the bay to the tip of the inlet, gas up, pick up beer at Gulley's and go about ten

miles out. Coming back they stop at Gulley's for more beer and for the guys to dump the fish they don't want. Gulley sells it in town. Everybody is usually drunk and happy." He gave me another thoughtful look. "You writing a book about your friend?" he said sarcastically.

"Could be. Could be. I hate to see him dead."

"If you ask me, he never should've fooled around Renzo. You better go home and save your money from now on, sonny."

"I'll take your advice," I said, "and be handyman around a rooming house."

He gave me a dull stare as I stood up and didn't bother to go to the door with me. He still had his hand in his pocket wrapped around the bill I gave him.

The street was empty and dark enough to keep me wrapped in a blanket of shadows. I stayed close to the houses, stopping now and then to listen. When I was sure I was by myself I felt better and followed the water smell of the bay.

At River Road a single pump gas station showed lights and the guy inside sat with his feet propped up on the desk. He opened one eye when I walked in, gave me the change I wanted for the phone, then went back to sleep again. I dialed the number of Gerot's club, got the attendant and told him what I wanted. He gave me another number and I punched it out on the dial.

Two persons answered before a voice said, "Gerot speaking."

"Hello, Captain. This is Joe. I was . . ."

"I remember," he said.

"I called Sergeant Gonzales tonight. Phil Carboy paid me off to finger Vetter. Now I got two parties pushing me."

"Three. Don't forget us."

"I'm not forgetting."

"I hear you've been moving around, Joe. Those parties are excited. Where are you?"

I didn't think he'd bother to trace the call, so I said, "Some joint in town."

His voice sounded light this time. "About Vetter. Tell me."

"Nothing to tell."

"You had a call this morning." I felt the chills starting to run up my back. They had a tap on my line already. "The voice wasn't familiar and it said some peculiar things."

"I know. I didn't get it. I thought it was part of Renzo's outfit getting wise. They beat up a buddy of mine so I'd know what a real beat-up guy looks like. It was all double talk to me."

He was thinking it over. When he was ready he said, "Maybe so, kid. You hear about that dame you were with?"

I could hardly get the words out of my mouth. "Helen? No . . . What?"

"Somebody shot at her. Twice."

"Did . . ."

"Not this time. She was able to

walk away from it this time."

"Who was it? Who shot at her?"

"That, little chum, is something we'd like to know too. She was waiting for a train out of town. The next time maybe we'll have better luck. There'll be a next time, in case you're interested."

"Yeah, I'm interested . . . and thanks. You know where she is now?"

"No, but we're looking around. *I hope we can find her first.*"

I put the phone back and tried to get the dry taste out of my mouth. When I thought I could talk again I dialed Helen's apartment, hung on while the phone rang endlessly, then held the receiver fork down until I got my coin back. I had to get Renzo's club number from the book and the gravelly voice that answered rasped that the feature attraction hadn't put in an appearance that night and for something's sake to cut off the chatter and wait until tomorrow because the club was closed.

So I stood there and said things to myself until I was all balled up into a knot. I could see the parade of faces I hated drifting past my mind and all I could think of was how bad I wanted to smash every one of them as they came by. Helen had tried to run for it. She didn't get far. Now where could she be? Where does a beautiful blonde go who is trying to hide? Who would take her in if they knew the score?

I could feel the sweat starting on my neck, soaking the back of my shirt. All of a sudden I felt washed

out and wrung dry. Gone. All the way gone. Like there wasn't anything left of me any more except a big hate for a whole damn city, the mugs who ran it and the people who were afraid of the mugs. And it wasn't just one city either. There would be more of them scattered all over the states. For the people, by the people, Lincoln had said. Yeah. Great.

I turned around and walked out. I didn't even bother to look back and if they were there, let them come. I walked for a half hour, found a cab parked at a corner with the driver sacking it behind the wheel and woke him up. I gave him the boarding house address and climbed in the back.

He let me off at the corner, collected his dough and turned around.

Then I heard that voice again and I froze the butt halfway to my mouth and squashed the matches in the palm of my hand.

It said, "Go ahead and light it."

I breathed that first drag out with the words, "You nuts? They're all around this place."

"I know. Now be still and listen. The dame knows the score. They tried for her . . ."

We heard the feet at the same time. They were light as a cat, fast. Then he came out of the darkness and all I could see was the glint of the knife in his hand and the yell that was in my throat choked off when his fingers bit into my flesh. I had time to see that same hardened face that had looked

into mine not so long ago, catch an expressionless grin from the hard boy, then the other shadows opened and the side of a palm smashed down against his neck. He pitched forward with his head at a queer, stiff angle, his mouth wrenched open and I knew it was only a reflex that kept it that way because the hard boy was dead. You could hear the knife chatter across the sidewalk and the sound of the body hitting, a sound that really wasn't much yet was a thunderous crash that split the night wide open.

The shadows the hand had reached out from seemed to open and close again, and for a short second I was alone. Just a short second. I heard the whisper that was said too loud. The snick of a gun somewhere, then I closed in against the building and ran for it.

At the third house I faded into the alley and listened. Back there I could hear them talking, then a car started up down the street. I cut around behind the houses, found the fences and stuck with them until I was at my place, then snaked into the cellar door.

When I got upstairs I slipped into the hall and reached for the phone. I asked for the police and got them. All I said was that somebody was being killed and gave the address. Then I grinned at the darkness, hung up without giving my name and went upstairs to my room. From way across town a siren wailed a lonely note, coming closer little by little. It was a pleasant sound at

that. It would give my friend from the shadows plenty of warning too. He was quite a guy. Strong. Whoever owned the dead man was going to walk easy with Vetter after this.

I walked into my room, closed the door and was reaching for the bolt when the chair moved in the corner. Then she said, "Hello, Joe," and the air in my lungs hissed out slowly between my teeth.

I said, "Helen." I don't know which one of us moved. I like to think it was her. But suddenly she was there in my arms with her face buried in my shoulder, stifled sobs pouring out of her body while I tried to tell her that it was all right. Her body was pressed against me, a fire that seemed to dance as she trembled, fighting to stay close to me.

"Helen, Helen, take it easy. Nothing will hurt you now. You're okay." I lifted her head away and smoothed back her hair. "Listen, you're all right here."

Her mouth was too close. Her eyes were too wet and my mind was thinking things that didn't belong there. My arms closed tighter and I found her mouth, warm and soft, a salty sweetness that clung desperately and talked to me soundlessly. But it stopped the trembling and when she pulled away she smiled and said my name softly.

"How'd you get here, Helen?"

Her smile tightened. "I was brought up in a place like this a long time ago. There are always ways. I found one."

"I heard what happened. Who was it?"

She tightened under my hands. "I don't know. I was waiting for a train when it happened. I just ran after that. When I got out on the street, it happened again."

"No cops?"

She shook her head. "Too fast. I kept running."

"They know it was you?"

"I was recognized in the station. Two men there had caught my show and said hello. You know how. They could have said something."

I could feel my eyes starting to squint. "Don't be so damn calm about it."

The tight smile twisted up at the corner. It was like she was reading my mind. She seemed to soften a moment and I felt her fingers brush my face. "I told you I wasn't like other girls, Joe. Not like the kind of girl you should know. Let's say it's all something I've seen before. After a bit you get used to it."

"Helen . . ."

"I'm sorry, Joe."

I shook my head slowly. "No . . . I'm the one who's sorry. People like you should never get like that. Not you."

"Thanks." She looked at me, something strange in her eyes that I could see even in the half light of the room. And this time it happened slowly, the way it should be. The fire was close again, and real this time, very real. Fire that could have burned deeply if the siren hadn't

closed in and stopped outside.

I pushed her away and went to the window. The beams of the flashlights traced paths up the sidewalk. The two cops were cursing the cranks in the neighborhood until one stopped, grunted something and picked up a sliver of steel that lay by the curb. But there was nothing else. Then they got back in the cruiser and drove off.

Helen said, "What was it?"

"There was a dead man out there. Tomorrow there'll be some fun."

"Joel!"

"Don't worry about it. At least we know how we stand. It was one of their boys. He made a pass at me on the street and got taken."

"You do it?"

I shook my head. "Not me. A guy. A real big guy with hands that can kill."

"Vetter." She said it breathlessly.

I shrugged.

Her voice was a whisper. "I hope he kills them all. Every one." Her hand touched my arm. "Somebody tried to kill Renzo earlier. They got one of his boys." Her teeth bit into her lip. "There were two of them so it wasn't Vetter. You know what that means?"

I nodded. "War. They want Renzo dead to get Vetter out of town. They don't want him around or he'll move into their racket sure."

"He already has." I looked at her sharply and she nodded. "I saw one of the boys in the band. Renzo's special car was hijacked as it was

leaving the city. Renzo claimed they got nothing but he's pretty upset. I heard other things too. The whole town's tight."

"Where do you come in, Helen?"

"What?" Her voice seemed taut.

"You. Let's say you and Cooley. What string are you pulling?" Her hand left my arm and hung down at her side. If I'd slapped her she would have had the same expression on her face. I said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. You liked Jack Cooley pretty well, didn't you?"

"Yes." She said it quietly.

"You told me what he was like once. What was he really like?"

The hurt flashed in her face again. "Like them," she said. "Gay, charming, but like them. He wanted the same things. He just went after them differently, that's all."

"The guy I saw tonight said you know things."

Her breath caught a little bit. "I didn't know before, Joe."

"Tell me."

"When I packed to leave . . . then I found out. Jack . . . left certain things with me. One was an envelope. There were cancelled checks in it for thousands of dollars made out to Renzo. The one who wrote the checks is a racketeer in New York. There was a note pad too with dates and amounts that Renzo paid Cooley."

"Blackmail."

"I think so. What was more important was what was in the box he left with me. *Heroin.*"

I swung around slowly. "Where is it?"

"Down a sewer. I've seen what the stuff can do to a person."

"Much of it?"

"Maybe a quarter pound."

"We could have had him," I said.

"We could have had him and you dumped the stuff!"

Her hand touched me again. "No . . . there wasn't that much of it. Don't you see, it's bigger than that. What Jack had was only a sample. Some place there's more of it, much more."

"Yeah," I said. I was beginning to see things now. They were starting to straighten themselves out and it made a pattern. The only trouble was that the pattern was so simple

it didn't begin to look real.

"Tomorrow we start," I said. "We work by night. Roll into the sack and get some sleep. If I can keep the landlady out of here we'll be okay. You sure nobody saw you come in?"

"Nobody saw me."

"Good. Then they'll only be looking for me."

"Where will you sleep?"

I grinned at her. "In the chair."

I heard the bed creak as she eased back on it, then I slid into the chair. After a long time she said, "Who are you, Joe?"

I grunted something and closed my eyes. I wished I knew myself sometimes.

(To be concluded in next issue.)





Teaser

BY WILLIAM LINDSAY GRESHAM

She was strange — passionate one minute and aloof and cold the next. It was almost as though there were two different women inside her beautiful body.

MANY MEN went out with Gerry Massingham. And when, apparently on the threshold of surrender, she suddenly seemed to change and stopped them, they realized that they could go just so far and no farther with her. They responded in a remarkably uniform fashion. First their faces registered desperation and something like hatred. Then they sulked. Then they got control of their dignity and would chat in a civilized manner for a few minutes. Then they went home, promising to phone her. Only they never did.

There were, in secret, two Gerrys . . . Warm Gerry and Cold Gerry. Sometimes, when a man had gone, Warm Gerry would take over, and

she would start to rush out toward the hall to remind him that he had left his pipe, or his scarf — anything to bring him back. But then Cold Gerry would take over and stop her, freeze her hand on the doorknob.

The other girls in the office did not suspect that there were two Gerrys. Warm Gerry was always turned on there, and the girls envied her looks, her poise and her small, beautifully decorated apartment. She would smile inwardly when one of the girls came home with her. Gerry could see what was going through the girl's mind — that Gerry was a *femme fatale* and had a tremendous life.

Only Cold Gerry, deep inside, knew how austere and cool and dis-

ciplined was the life led between these walls, painted contrasting shades of chartreuse and dark green . . . beside the lucite coffee table with its gleaming copper, and the ivy which twined up the piece of driftwood Gerry had brought back from the Cape one summer.

The beige rug matched the two beige chairs and the deep, inviting sofa. And in Gerry's small bedroom the fiercely feminine simplicity and delicacy of the lampshade beside her single bed would have warned any man of real sensitivity that Gerry was a devoted spinster and there was no Bachelor Girl in her anywhere.

"Cold Gerry" was her own term for herself in a self-protective mood. It had grown into an affectionate term. "Warm Gerry" was affectionate, too. Because that was the side the world knew and admired, and it was Warm Gerry who had the men clustered about her at office parties.

In all her experience, Gerry Massingham met only three men who did not have the typical reaction of pain, desperation, sulks and vanity-saving flippancy at the end. Their names were Clarke Trowbridge, Dr. Immanuel Fein and Joe McAllister.

Warm Gerry had felt drawn to Clarke first of all because of the way his damp, dust-colored hair fell over his forehead. He stammered slightly when he was excited or

deeply moved and music could make him practically speechless. Holding Gerry's hand at a concert he would quiver with intensity when the music swept into some intricacy which he, she knew from his feverish, long bursts of confidence, was always trying to reach in his own work.

"Maybe I'm too eager," he said, sitting in the little cellar restaurant on the last night she ever went out with him. "But something in me says I'm licked before I get there. Look, Gerry—the themes are all around me. They pop out of nowhere. And I can hear the development of them. But when I get to staff paper . . . the flatness of it; the coldness of it . . . would you like another Martini, Gerry? I'd like one. Have another to keep me company, Gerry. Please do."

Gerry had another Martini and her face in the candlelight kept its gentle little smile of sympathy; her eyes, which were a brilliant blue, now looked smoky grey in the yellow light of the candle.

Clarke swept his hair back from his eyes and drank down the Martini in a gulp.

"You're going to get drunk, Clarke," Gerry said, Warm Gerry speaking with the sweet, husky voice. She knew that candlelight threw the bones of her face into exquisite shadows and she knew that the darkness of her hair had golden highlights in it. She saw in the drawn face of Clarke Trowbridge

how enchanting she seemed to him. And she felt guilty inside, for Cold Gefry reminded her that she was not enchanting, not at all in the way men wanted, not really, deep inside.

Cold Gerry often told Warm Gerry that she was a fraud. But there was little real animosity between the two Gerrys. One got her the eye-worship she needed to feel comfortable and the other defended her fortress of resolution and the life she had laid out for herself. Cold Gerry, that is, had laid it out years ago.

Clarke wiped his hair out of his eyes again. "Gerry — let's get out of here. That sonata tonight — you see, that is sort of what I'm trying to do. And while Braunstein is playing I make believe that I've written it. And I can hear one of my own themes going in and out of it. Then the applause at the end comes for me, sort of. That's how I pretend. Do you understand, Gerry?"

Her smile was warm.

When she opened the door of the apartment her gloved finger found the light switch and there it was, waiting for her, her fortress — the contrasting walls, the lucite table. And in the darkness of the bedroom was the chaste single bed and the lamp with its virginal, alabaster-like shade.

Clarke sank onto one end of the sofa and Gerry pulled up the big Venetian blind which hid the kitchenette side of the living room. She broke out ice cubes and silently

poured gin and vermouth into the mixer, twirling it with a bar spoon. Clarke watched her. She was tall, with lovely shoulders and narrow hips, in her black skirt and snowy, low-cut blouse. She set the glass before him and poured. A small one for herself, said Cold Gerry, smiling deep inside.

She knew that Clarke was working up to demanding.

She took the chair with the high arms. Cold Gerry had chosen it, thinking, "They'll try to scoop you out of it like a clam from its shell. Between its high arms you are safe, able to think and say the things you have to say at such times, Gerry. You'll be able to block their selfishness in such a chair; it's like a fortress around you."

Now Clarke reached for the Martini mixer and filled his glass again. "Gerry. . . ." They always begin with your name, in tormented tones. "Gerry. . . you must see, you must know . . . I'm so devilish clumsy with words. I mean, I need a catalyst. In my work, I mean. I know if you married me now you'd still have to work. For a while. But Gerry — I won't go on teaching harmony to kids all my life. I'll write stuff and get it performed. You'll see. I need you, not just for my music, but . . . just for my life. I just . . . just need you. So bad."

"Maybe what you really need is another Martini and then to go home and get a good night's rest."

Gerry crushed the tiny olive against the roof of her mouth with her tongue. "I've told you, Clarke, that I'm not a marrying woman."

"But you love me, Gerry. You wouldn't see me so often if you didn't."

This was it. He was sitting on the floor now, rubbing his cheek against the fabric of her skirt where it was stretched tight over her thigh. He slid his hands between her and the high arms of the chair, clutching her. Gerry let her free hand float over his head and come to rest on the back of his neck. "I'm afraid I've given you the wrong ideas, Clarke," Cold Gerry said, speaking still with Warm Gerry's voice. "Really, I'm not such a nice person if you get to know me."

Clarke's mouth drew into the familiar lines of desperation. "*Get to know you!* Gerry — remember the time the stadium concert was rained out and we ducked into a doorway? Remember how you kissed me then? Gerry . . . have you forgotten that I've kissed you . . . touched you. . . ?"

He scrambled awkwardly to his feet and gripped her hands. She lay back in the chair; his feet slipped as he tugged, drawing her to her feet. This time when his lips found hers the insistence of his mouth met the mouth of Cold Gerry, sweet, cool, remote, smiling a little at the corners.

She did not draw away from his hands. Instead, she stood like a

statue of Diana, lovely and unattainable, and watched the sweat streak its way down his gaunt temple.

"Gerry — my God, don't you realize what this does to a man?"

"You'd better go now, Clarke." Cold Gerry spoke in her own voice, with no interference from that dazzling, melting, bitch-in-heat Warm Gerry. "No, Clarke, you mustn't misunderstand me. *There is no room in my life for sex. I decided long ago that I must go one way or the other. If I gave in I would end in the gutter. I have my own standards. And nothing you say or do can change me in the least.*" She drew breath and went on more softly, "Please go now."

The words sounded archaic, out of the past generation, as if they came from an old play.

He was on his knees now before her, pressing against her, and she found it necessary to disengage his hands and push him away abruptly. She was waiting for the sulks and then the face-saving attempt to be very Noel Coward, very sophisticated, very sporting. Instead he disintegrated. Cold Gerry stepped back in disgust. The thing on the beige rug was a sickening infant.

"Please leave, Clarke!" she said sharply.

Now he was sitting, his hands before his face, sitting with his long legs spread out like a child in a sand pile.

At last he gazed up at her out of tormented, colorless eyes. He gagged

twice as if he were going to be sick, and Gerry felt a twinge of alarm for the rug, but he struggled to his feet and lurched into the hall. She followed him, tall, regal and remote. Warm Gerry fought her way forward for an instant to lay a hand on his arm, steadying him. "Sorry, Clarke." Then Cold Gerry had the upper hand again. "But I warned you when we first met that I was a disappointing woman. Now you know."

At the door he turned. Now would come the good loser, the flippancy, and all would end on a proper note. But it didn't. "I ought to knock you down and pull the clothes off you," he said. "Only you know I won't. You're just a teaser. That's what you are. Do you hear me? Just a teaser. A lousy teaser." His voice had risen until it cracked ludicrously. Cold Gerry could barely keep herself from laughing in his face.

"You . . . you made me think you wanted me," the man's voice went on, in a lower key with more control. "All right, I've learned. You don't have to worry about me saying anything about you. I won't talk. I won't ever mention your name again. Not even to myself, I won't. You tear a man into bloody chunks and then you want to be civilized and . . . and . . . oh, go to hell!"

He fumbled with the door catch and Gerry had to work it for him and open the door. She closed it

softly behind him and stood listening until the elevator rose, stopped, opened, closed and descended.

Then Warm Gerry filled her and she pressed her forehead against the cool metal of the apartment door. The tears went sliding down her face until Cold Gerry, indignant, pushed her back, back, far back in the mind, saying harshly, "Be careful, you fool. He may come stumbling back. Don't open the door. Don't open the door. Get in the shower and turn on the water so you can't hear the doorbell. You fool, some day you will be lost."

But Clarke Trowbridge did not come back. That night he took twenty-eight sleeping capsules. And when Gerry read about it in the paper the next morning, Warm Gerry cried, the silly tears making her eyes red. Life was so hard on sensitive people.

Dr. Immanuel Fein's hands on the wheel and the gearshift lever had a sureness of touch that made Gerry feel safe and well-taken-care-of. He slid his big convertible into the parking bay; under the full moon, rolling hills lay silvery with the night. Then he cut the motor and the lights and drew on the hand brake.

Gerry untied her scarf and ran her hands through her hair, shaking it out. She took a deep breath and leaned back against the upholstery, watching the stars. The summer wind brought back memories of evenings at home, the hammock on

the front porch and boys who talked softly in the darkness, and a group of kids singing close harmony. Gerry remembered her own contralto among them and sighed.

Dr. Fein took off his glasses and placed them on the dashboard shelf. He let his arm slide around her waist; Gerry drew another breath and leaned toward him. She felt the exciting hardness of the muscle in his arm as he held her closer. His lips touched her hair at the temple. And his voice whispered, "Darling."

She made a contented little sound. Warm Gerry thrilled to Manny's touch. His breath quickened. "I wanted to bring you out here, Gerry," he said softly. "On an evening when there was a moon. I've often stopped here when I was alone and wished a girl like you was with me. And now you're here."

Her lips found the hollow of his throat. "I'm here."

His arms tightened. Warm Gerry let her hand slide up to find his cheek. Without his glasses the sternness left him. He was really a very handsome man. And it was sweet being with him under moonlight. And safe. Safe here with other cars nearby. Manny would do nothing to alarm her. Only the sweet things which stirred her and in a strange way satisfied her, tingling all over, in a way no man could understand.

At last he took his mouth from hers. "Want to ask you something Gerry. Same old question. Why *not*

marry me? Don't have to wear a ring. Don't have to change your name. Or give up your apartment. Or your job. Let's just go along together . . . always. Say, 'Yes.'"

"Manny, darling — mustn't ask me that."

"But you like seeing me?"

She dug her nails into the muscle of his arm.

"Want . . . want to go back to your place?"

"Anywhere you want to go, Manny."

He was silent on the drive home, manipulating the car expertly with his left hand. His right she kept prisoner between her own and when he tightened his fingers her own replied.

In the vestibule of the apartment house she turned. This time his hands were demanding and his lips hard. Cold Gerry, who had been waiting with that marble patience which was her strength, pushed Warm Gerry aside and Manny was kissing Cold Gerry instead. He recoiled. "Gerry, hon — what's the matter?"

"Nothing, Manny. It's been a very pleasant evening. Now you must let me go."

"It's early, Gerry. Let's have some coffee and a cigarette together."

She shook her head. "Too late."

He seized her in his arms, crushing his mouth against hers, and Warm Gerry fought, whimpering and clawing, to get through to him and give herself to him and let him hurt her

the way women have always let men hurt them. Cold Gerry had a tussle with her but managed to push her out and hold her away.

"I don't get it," Manny said hoarsely at last. "Gerry — do you realize we've had four dates in the past week? You *do* care for me. I couldn't get my signals crossed after . . . I just don't get it."

Then Cold Gerry spoke. "No, Manny. You mustn't misunderstand me. *There is no room in my life for sex. I decided long ago that I must go one way or the other. If I gave in I would end in the gutter. I have my own standards. And nothing you say or do can change me in the least.*" Like words from an old play. She drew breath and went on more softly, "Please go now."

Dr. Immanuel Fein had taken off his glasses when they entered the vestibule. Now he drew them from his pocket, opened them with a flip and put them on. His voice was detached, kindly and businesslike . . . a doctor's voice. His fingers snapped suddenly beside her ear with a sound like a rifle shot.

"Who says that? Who taught you that speech?"

Gerry swallowed hard. Deep inside her Warm Gerry was screaming, "Mother says it! Mother! Mother! Let me out. Let me out to him. I want him to kiss me. I want him to have me. To have me, have me, have me. To hurt me and love me. Don't listen to Mother. She's dead. She's dead."

Cold Gerry smiled with one corner of her mouth. "Why . . . why *I* say it — *Doctor Fein*. Yes — *I* say it. Now, please, let's say good night."

But Dr. Fein had no intention of saying good night. He said, "Come out and sit in the car a minute, Gerry. I want to talk to you. For real."

Cold Gerry smiled.

"If you wish. But only for a moment."

"Sure. 'Only a moment' is all I need. If you can listen."

He slid in first and then reached across her and closed the door softly. "Gerry — forget all about I ever proposed to you. Or touched you. All that stuff."

"Yes?" Smiling faintly, smiling sweetly, statue of Diana, maiden goddess, chaste and fair.

"Now listen to me, kid. I'm not trying to sell you a bill of goods. I think you're swell. I want to help you. . . ."

Cold Gerry had met this I-want-to-help-you-type before, but it was just deceit to cover up what they really wanted. She listened coolly.

"I mean it. Gerry — let me ask you something and I want you to answer straight out, without taking time to think. *Are there two of you?*"

"How dare you!" Furiously she fumbled with the latch of the car door. "Let me out of this car before I have to start screaming for the police."

She was standing on the curb.

Manny's voice pursued her. "Baby, you need help. Believe me. Helping people is my business. I know what I'm talking about. You don't have to talk to me about it. I'll give you the address of a woman doctor. I know a couple of good ones. If you can't stand the tariff for office calls I'll fix you up at the clinic. Dr. Rose Stillwell, she's tops. You'd like her. Go tell her about whatever it is that's tangling you up. Go tell her about this business of two Gerrys. Will you?"

"Good night, Dr. Fein."

"Call me if you feel different about it. If you want to talk to somebody."

She turned on her heel and moved, regal and remote, into the dark vestibule, hearing the soft purr of the car move off into the night behind her.

Manny even wrote her a note but it wasn't the usual kind. He said, "... might get you into trouble, Gerry. You don't have to see me again. Better not. But talk to Rose Stillwell. She's a swell gal. You'd like her."

Cold Gerry tore the note into small, small pieces and let them drift into the wastebasket. What a disgusting, self-assured animal lay under that handsome façade, she told herself, and felt equal disgust for the distant whimpering of Warm Gerry, locked into a closet of the mind.

Dancing with Joe McAllister was one of the strangest experiences

which had ever happened to her. He couldn't speak a sentence in correct English; he wore flashy suits and shirts and handpainted neckties — nudes. Yet the touch of his tough, calloused palm against hers, the hard sureness of his right hand against her waist, stirred her. Warm Gerry delighted in him. He was a wiry, hot-eyed man and had an odd way of looking over his shoulder as if expecting someone he knew to step out of a corner.

Back at their table he forgot to push her chair under her; Warm Gerry took pleasure in settling herself.

"You know something, sugar?" Joe said, jerking his head for the waiter to bring him another bourbon-and-water. "We go together like fried catfish and hush puppies."

Warm Gerry laughed, her throat slender and marble-like in the glow from the rose lampshade on their table. "Tell me some more things we're like."

He never seemed to smile, even when joking. "You're like a million things, honey. All of 'em honey-sweet."

"Tell me some."

He drank the double bourbon in a gulp, swallowed a sip of water and reached across the table to grasp her hand. "Like something carved out of marble with a fire burning inside it."

She squeezed the calloused hand, dark-tanned against the white table cloth. His eyes were black, and his

head was as agile as a bird's, turning to watch the other dancers, to watch the door of the dining room as if he were expecting to meet someone there, only he never saw anyone he knew.

"Go on, darling."

"Why, sugar, you're like summertime. After a hard winter. One of these northern winters, freeze you fit to die. You're like moonlight down home and a whole lot of them little old swamp frogs, singing about the new year a-coming."

She laughed again. "Now I'm like a swamp full of frogs. I'm learning a great deal about myself, going around with you, Mr. McAllister. You know, Joe — you're the first strange man I ever spoke to in a bar. And I'm glad I did."

He was standing and she was standing too. He had left a bill on the table and was taking her arm. The headwaiter watched them go, the girl tall, marble white and black-haired, the man flashy, quick, dark, and with that air about him which suggested a weapon held against the ribs of the world.

In the cab Joe started a long, rambling story. Warm Gerry was only half-listening, watching his face leap out of darkness as the cab passed the street lights, holding the slender, calloused hand tight between both of hers in her lap.

She was hardly aware of his paying the driver, and the story continued in the elevator, and then when her finger found the light

switch and the chartreuse and green walls leaped out of darkness, she felt his hand, firm, warm, compelling, against her hip.

The story somehow came to an end and she didn't notice. "I'm afraid I haven't any bourbon, Joe. Will rye do?"

"It's drinking whiskey, isn't it, sugar?"

Gerry spun about with a start at a flash of light behind her. The bedroom, her own bedroom, temple of her devotion to a Way of Life she had chosen for herself, was violated by a rush of light.

Joe switched the light off again and when he saw her face he softened and nearly smiled. "Lookin' for the little boys' room, sugar."

"Oh." She went ahead of him, turning on the light.

When he came out she was seated in the chair with the high arms, sipping a Scotch and soda. Joe's rye was on the coffee table and the table was between her and the sofa.

He picked up the drink and tossed it off, standing. Then he came over to her chair. Cold Gerry, self-contained, alert, in control, gazed up at him, a ghostly smile on the corners of the full-lipped, kissable mouth. Joe took her drink from her and placed it on the lucite table. Then he seized both her hands — the old, old routine — and hoisted her out of the chair to her feet. His hand twisted in her hair and bent her head down, holding it rigid. Then he kissed her.

The lips of Cold Gerry were sweet and remote, saying all that need be said to any man whose heart was making the big blood vessels at the side of his neck throb in the lamp-light.

"Maybe you need a couple of quick straight ones, sugar," he said, still keeping his hand in her hair.

She shook her head. "I shouldn't have let you come up, Joe. It isn't fair to you. . . ."

He interrupted her. "I'm here, ain't I?"

"But I'm afraid you misunderstand me. If you think. . . ."

Frantically Warm Gerry was screaming in the closet of the mind, "Let me out. Let me out. Let me go to him. I'll take off my clothes. I'll let him bite my lips. I'll have him — hurting me, hurting me — anything he wants."

Cold Gerry drew in her breath. "Stop it, please, you're hurting me."

With a surge of alarm she found herself jolting down to a seat on the couch beside him. He had put a pillow at her back, swept her feet from the floor and was sitting beside her, his arms locked under her shoulders, his mouth near hers, his eyes black, burning, unwavering.

"Look here, sugar — we been together four nights running. And I haven't bought you anything but liquor. I haven't promised you presents or jewelry or anything. So it isn't anything but me you want. You don't have to act bashful any

more. Just turn your mouth up and start kissing. Honey, we're going to climb up that old ladder to heaven and roost right on the stars."

She struggled to sit up but he held her. Tight. Warm Gerry was sobbing, there at the back of the mind. Cold Gerry was never more herself and she was cold fury.

"Will you please let go of me, Mister McAllister?"

He shook his head a fraction of an inch. "Uh-uh."

She strained against his hands and his fingers tightened on her shoulders, making her suck in her breath. "Joe, you're hurting me."

"Yep."

Cold Gerry went limp and the smile curled the corners of her mouth. "Mr. Joe McAllister . . . I find you a most entertaining man. But you must realize something about me. *There is no room in my life for sex. I decided long ago that I must go one way or the other. If I gave in I would end in the gutter. . . .*"

"Quit talking."

She wrenched her mouth free of his. "Mr. McAllister . . . do I have to start screaming for the police?"

"You aren't going to scream. You're going to hush up and lay it on the line, baby. My name isn't McAllister. No difference what my name is. I'm a man. Now you start being a woman."

Gerry heard her own breath hissing between her teeth as she drew the air into her lungs. She heard her own voice, the words tumbling out,

"There is no room in my life for sex. I decided long ago that I must go one way or another. . . ."

Her vision blurred and her mouth had a salty taste. Then she knew that he had struck her a sharp, back-hand blow across the mouth.

Gerry's eyes were so wide now that white showed around the pupils. She found no words and words were Cold Gerry's most deadly defense.

The man was speaking, ". . . so I done a stretch on the rockpile, just on account of one like you. And I'm not ashamed of it either. Be good and we'll get along."

Summoning all her strength, Gerry squirmed free and tore loose from his grip, her hair disheveled, her dress ripped under the arms, breathing heavily. "Leave this apartment at once. Before I call the police."

He seized one of her hands and drew her toward him. She tripped over his foot and fell where he wanted her to fall — back on the beige sofa that matched the rug. Now he had her hands over her head, her thumbs imprisoned in his fist; as he tightened his hold the bones of her thumbs grated cruelly together. Then he relaxed the pressure, stopping the punishment but

still keeping her body his prisoner.

"You aren't going to get away with it, honey. Not this time. You seen me four nights running. You're going to put out."

The scream got to her lips but somehow couldn't get past them. She felt the blood vessels of her throat pounding with great hammer-like blows and knew that his other hand was clamped on them, his iron fingers digging in. She felt one of her pumps come off as she kicked and she felt the sharp angle of his hipbone holding her down.

Cold Gerry seemed to burn with a bright flame that was as cold as ice.

"You got half a minute. Going to be a woman?"

And then it was an insane mixture, with Warm Gerry yielding and Cold Gerry fighting, and her wildness was so great that his own wildness grew, and he took a switch-knife from his pocket and pressed it into her back even as he fought to kiss her. And Warm Gerry surged in triumphant, free at last, as the light in her brain went out.

Even after the heart stopped beating, Warm Gerry lived on for a dozen long, ecstatic seconds, singing with fulfillment, feeling the man's teeth meet in her lower lip. . . .



Prognosis Negative

BY FLOYD MAHANNAH

Makin had nothing to lose, so he went after Fidaço. This way, he might be dead just a little bit sooner.

PROGNOSIS *negative*. We may as well get that part straight right now. It's a medical term, and what it means is that your chances are exactly zero.

You're going to die.

I walked out of the clinic that afternoon in a kind of daze, not seeing much of the busy street or the trees or the sunshine, because I was still wrestling with the idea that I was going to die; and it might even happen the next minute. It could be the next minute, but the doc's best estimate was a year; the outside limit was two years. Your mind just doesn't accept a thing like that.

The bartender said, "What will you have, sir?"

"Uh — rye. Straight rye."

I sat there with the rye in my hand, looking at the mirror behind the bar, and at the guy staring back at me. Jim Makin: age thirty-three, height six even, weight one-eighty, hair black, eyes gray, occupation private detective — prognosis negative.



"Something wrong, sir?"

"Wrong?"

"Something wrong with the drink?"

"No." I drank it, and I didn't taste a thing. "No, everything's fine."

There had been no doubt about what ailed me. Today's clinic had been the fifth; and today's neurosurgeon had been the big league, the court of final appeal. He said I had an inaccessible tumor growing in my brain; he said the prognosis was negative; and when he said a thing like that, you were the same as dead.

I left the bar. I walked a long time, aimlessly, and I guess it was force of habit that brought me finally to my office door:

J. MAKIN
PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS

I hadn't noticed before how dingy it looked, the peeling gold leaf, the dirty frosted glass. I put my key in lock, and I found it was already unlocked. I went in.

The place was a mess — more of a mess than usual, I mean. A lot more. Papers were all over the floor, files hung open, drawers had been pulled out. And in the middle of it stood a man.

Big Sam Cannon.

Yesterday I'd have been scared. Yesterday my heart would have pulled up in my throat, I'd have tried to paste a smile on my face, and I'd have started talking as fast as I knew how. But today nothing was

real. Not Jim Makin, not prognosis negative, not even Big Sam.

"Hello, Sam."

"Hello, peeper."

Big Sam grinned, showing all his broken teeth; and when Big Sam grinned, you were supposed to start shaking, because Big Sam was the right arm of Ernie Fidako; and Ernie Fidako — well, Ernie Fidako was the big stuff in this part of California. If you call gambling, dope, and running wetbacks big stuff. Now Big Sam said:

"Where is she, peeper?"

"Where is who?"

"Don't dummy on me. Revita Rosales. The tamale that took off with sixty grand of Ernie's dough. And don't tell me you're not hiding her."

A detached part of my mind was thinking that this was it: now that they knew what I'd done, it was going to end only one way — a ride down the river in a barrel of concrete, and a grave in the deep part of San Francisco Bay. But it still wasn't real.

"Come on, where is she?"

"Where you won't find her." It didn't sound like my voice.

He grinned like a big, broken-toothed cat. "So you *have* got her, huh? Imagine, a two-bit dick like you teaming up against Ernie Fidako. Where is she?"

I shook my head, but I didn't say anything.

"Spill it, and Ernie might forgive and forget. Otherwise —" He left it

lying there — the alternative — the slug in the back, the concrete coffin, the long sleep under the Bay.

I grinned at him, suddenly.

Big Sam's leathery forehead creased like he didn't understand. The way he saw it, I ought to be scared silly, I ought to be talking a blue streak. I'd crossed Ernie Fidako, and in this town that was poison.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"Ever hear of prognosis negative, Sam?"

"Riddles, huh?" Big Sam grunted. He was in no hurry; he liked this cat and mouse game. "What's it?"

"It's a cold, ugly thing, Sam. It follows you around wherever you go. You wake up at two in the morning, and there it'll be, roosting on the foot of your bed. It's bad. You wouldn't like it, Sam. There's only one good thing about it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You don't have to be scared of anything else any more. You've got nothing to lose. Does that make sense, Sam?"

"Is it supposed to?"

I swear, I didn't even know I was going to hit him.

My fist slammed into his mouth. He staggered back, smacked into my desk, went half up on top of it; and I was as surprised as he was. He hung there on the desk long enough for the blood to form in his smashed lips; then he came off the desk with a harsh, gargled sound that had no words in it. I didn't back away. I stepped in close, inside his swing,

and I sunk my fist into his belly, and it went in like it was going to come out the back. He jackknifed forward, and I backed a little, and when his head came down, I gave him a knee in the face, and he went over backwards, half under the knee hole of the desk. This time he stayed put.

I stared at him in awe.

Me, Jim Makin, I'd taken Big Sam Cannon.

"God almighty!" I said reverently.

His gun had fallen out of its holster onto the floor, but Big Sam wasn't interested in it or in anything else, except being sick under my desk. I picked up the gun and put it in my pocket.

He was groaning and being very sick, and it was nothing you'd care to watch, so I left.

I must have walked twenty blocks, going no place, not thinking much, nor feeling much, except that queer, happy sensation I'd gotten when I lowered the boom on Big Sam. Prognosis negative or no prognosis negative, that had been a fine feeling. And something else came with it too — the germ of an idea. An idea that grew.

At my apartment, I went to the phone and dialed a number. I waited, counting the fourteen rings. Then she answered:

"Hello?"

"Revita? It's Jim."

"Oh." There was distrust in her

voice, and I didn't blame her. She'd hired me to find her husband, and I'd found him two weeks ago, but I hadn't told her. I'd been afraid she'd take it to the law, and the law would take it to Ernie Fidako — not that they could prove anything on Ernie Fidako — and afterwards Ernie would take it back to me. I'd been plenty scared of Ernie Fidako yesterday. Now I gave it to her straight:

"About your husband —"

"You've found him?"

"He's dead, Revita."

There wasn't a sound. No gasp, no tears, no nothing. I could see her face in my mind — oval, olive skinned, lovely, with full lips, short straight nose, dark eyes that were almost too big — a sensitive face, but with a strength under it that was the Indian part of her.

"I'm sorry, Revita."

"Who — killed him?" Nobody had mentioned murder, but she knew. "Was it Ernie Fidako?"

"I don't know. Maybe one of his men."

"Which one?"

"I don't know."

She was silent a long time. Maybe she was fingering that needle-sharp dagger she carried in her garter above the knee; or maybe she was holding her crucifix and praying — it would be one or the other. I said:

"Fidako knows I've got you hidden out, and that I was working for you. You've got to get out of town."

"Where could I possibly go to?"
"Go home. Back to Mexico. And take the money with you. It's as much yours as anybody's."

She didn't answer, so I went on:

"And hurry. There's no time to pack anything but the money. Take a taxi to the airport; buy a ticket to Phoenix, Arizona, and take the bus from there to Nogales. Getting the money across the border may be a problem —"

"I know how to do it."

She probably did. "Okay, that's it," I said.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing. We're square."

"You're sure — about my husband —"

"Yes. I'll see that he has proper burial."

"But I —"

"I'll take care of it, and I'll let you know where. Right now, the important thing is you. And listen —"

"Yes?"

"Don't worry about who killed him. I'll find the guy; and I'll take care of him too. I swear it."

"Thank you." Her voice was easier. "Good-bye, Jim."

"Good luck, kid."

After she hung up, I sat there, alone with old prognosis negative again. But I wasn't paying a lot of attention now, because this idea was still growing in my head. It was a fine idea. I liked it. In a way, it was like planning a party.

It was almost dark now. I pulled the shades, switched on the lights,

and took Big Sam's gun out of my pocket.

It was a .38 Smith and Wesson Hammerless with a three inch barrel. A lovely little gun, the kind you can carry in your pants pocket, and draw without any hammer snagging in the pocket. A small gun, packing a hell of a wallop. I opened it up, sighted up the barrel, and like everything about Big Sam, the gun was dirty.

I cleaned it, oiled it, wiped off the excess oil, checked the loads, and put it together, while I thought about Revita Rosales.

You'd call her a wetback — at least she was in the United States illegally — but there are two sides to everything. In Mexico when the hard times hit or your luck goes bad, you've got no social security or job insurance to fall back on. You run out of money and you go hungry, and if you go hungry long enough, you die. And nobody does a thing about it.

And all the time, right across the border, there's the United States like a fat fairyland, where jobs are for the asking, and even the dogs don't go hungry.

The U. S. Immigration Service says you can't go over there; but there are guys like Ernie Fidako that can smuggle you across and arrange a job for you. Not a good job. The farmers who hire wetbacks don't have to pay good wages. But after Mexico it seems like a fortune. Even after Ernie Fidako takes a

whopping chunk of every dollar, it's still enough to live on.

And it still beats Mexico.

But not if you're pretty like Revita. The pretty ones are too valuable to waste on farms; and Ernie Fidako lines up a far different and far uglier job for them — after he gets through with them himself.

Revita's husband was sent up the river to pick tomatoes, with the promise he would be rejoined with his wife as soon as more jobs opened up. Revita? She went to Ernie Fidako's house. She was to be a housemaid, but she soon found out what that meant.

And right then she got the only break she got since she left Mexico. Ernie Fidako was careless with money. He made a lot of it, and he wasn't much afraid of anybody trying to heist it. The third day, after Ernie left the house, Revita pried open three cabinets, and the third one contained sixty thousand dollars, just stacked there like a bunch of cigar coupons with rubber bands around them.

Revita put them in a paper sack, and walked out.

Now she had to find her husband. She'd lived a while in Nogales on the Mexican side, so she knew about taxicabs. And she'd heard about private detectives too; only she'd gotten it all cockeyed. The way she got it; detectives were like priests or lawyers — you told them something and they were obligated not to reveal it.

She found a cab driver who spoke Spanish, and he helped her find a private detective who spoke Spanish. Me, Jim Makin. She put a thousand dollars of Ernie Fidako's money on my desk; and I rented a house for her to hide in, and I went out to look for her husband.

You understand, ordinarily I wouldn't have touched the job with a forty-foot pole; but it was a lot of dough, and I needed it for the clinics and specialists. So I took it.

What happened to her husband? I got the first part of the story in whispered Spanish over a jug of bum sherry from a couple of copper-faced characters who had disappeared like smoke when I went back the next day to confirm it. It seems Elpidio Rosales had wanted his wife back. He'd raised hell about it for two days and had gotten exactly nothing except a black eye; so the second night he'd pulled out, presumably headed for the nearest law; and that's the last the two characters had seen of him.

The rest of the story was in a three-inch item in the paper about a nameless Mexican transient fished out of the river with his throat cut from ear to ear. The description fitted Elpidio Rosales. And E. R. was tattooed on his left arm, as Revita had said.

I sat there, Big Sam's gun in my hand, thinking about all of it, and planning my party; then the phone rang, and I answered it.

"Jim" — it was Revita's voice,

soft and taut — "some men are at my door!"

"Police?"

"I don't know. I pecked through the curtain and one of them is all cut around the mouth, and his nose is swollen —"

"Big Sam!"

"Who is he?"

My mind put it together in a second. My wire had been tapped. They'd traced the call to Revita's house. Right now I could hear a distant, tinny voice on the wire:

"Open up. In the name of the law!"

There wasn't time to explain to Revita. I broke the connection instantly, dialed the operator.

"Get me the Santa Carlita County Sheriff's office. It's an emergency."

She made it quick, and I told the deputy:

"A woman is being kidnapped from 1127 Troviglia Road. That's south of town just this side of Wayside Highway."

"1127 Troviglia Road," he repeated it as he wrote. "Who is this calling?"

I hung up..

Ten minutes it would take at the outside for the sheriff's car to get there, but I knew almost certainly that it wouldn't be soon enough. Why had she been so slow about leaving? Now it was too late.

It was a mess from here on in.

The party was starting, but it was starting too early, and it was

starting all wrong from the way I'd planned it. I stood up, shoved the gun in my pants pocket, put on my coat, and left. Wherever they took her, whatever they did to her, one man would know.

Ernie Fidako.

Ernie Fidako's house was north of town, and it was a long low ranch-style setup, with almost enough land around it to make it a real ranch. There were lights burning and three cars in the parking area.

I didn't try to sneak up. I was through sneaking up on anything. I barged right up the driveway, left my car in the middle of it, and started for the house. The veranda was dark, so I didn't see the guy there, until he stood up right in front of me.

"Who did you want to see?"

He was close enough to touch, but it was dark, and he didn't see my hand until it was swinging. The gun muzzle hit the side of his head, and I guess he had his mouth open to yell, but all that came out was a long sigh. I caught him and eased him to the porch.

I didn't put the gun back in my pocket.

I tried the front door, and it wasn't locked. The front hall was lighted only by the reflection from the door of another room. I cat-footed along the hall, looked into a den where nobody was, then a big voice from another part of the house hollered:

"Hey, Max. Who came in?" Ernie Fidako's voice.

I tracked it.

"Max, dammit —"

"Okay, Boss, I'll see."

I thumbed the safety off the gun. Chances were we were going to meet in this hall, Max and I.

I backed six or eight feet to where some drapes framed the entry to what was probably a living room; and now I could hear Max's feet coming along the hall, moving my way — and that's the last thing I did hear.

Something like a brilliant light went off inside my head; but I didn't hear a thing, or feel a thing. Just the blaze of light that was swallowed up in darkness, and after that nothing. I was nothing. Nobody. Nowhere.

How long it was like that, I don't know. Then, far away, it was like a pulse started to beat somewhere in me — a pulse of thought. *Negative*, was the thought . . . *negative* . . . *negative* . . .

And with it came a wonder — was I dead? — had it happened?

Then an ache joined the pulse of thought. And a light joined the ache. A light through my closed eyelids.

I wasn't dead.

I was hurt. But I wasn't dead.

I hurt more with every pulse. My head. And now I could feel the breath in my throat, coming in hard, going out hard. I was lying on my face on something hard. Then suddenly, the way you switch on a

radio, a voice cut through the fog in my mind:

"—imagine, a punk like him. Must of gone nuts. A punk like him."

"You imagine it. I don't like the way he got in here. I'm twenty feet away from a bullet, and you're sitting on your fat can in the kitchen lapping up beer. What the hell do I pay you for if not protection?"

"Aw, Boss —"

"Shut up. Turn him over. Throw some water on him."

They shut up. I was turned over. Water hit me in the face. I opened my eyes.

"What the hell's the idea, Ma-kin?"

They looked enormously tall, standing over me. Four of them. Ernie Fidako, broad, blond, pink-faced; Big Sam, big as a house, his face a mess; a third guy with a narrow, nervous face; and a fourth who looked pure Mexican. The ache in my head was a shattering thing; it made my muscles feel like rubber and my stomach feel like I was going to be sick. But the sickest thing was the thought in my mind:

I'd flopped.

All the talk about prognosis negative, and nothing to lose, and why not fling one last party to have one honest memory to take with you — and what had it come to? I had only to turn my head to see how complete the flop had been.

Beside me, near enough to touch, was Revita Rosales; she was in a

straight chair, and her eyes watched me, wide and frightened.

Ernie said again, "What's the idea?"

I shook my head, not trusting my voice.

Big Sam said: "Went nuts, huh?"

"Nuts or not" — Fidako's voice was a cold thing — "I want that sixty grand. Now where is it?"

So they hadn't picked the money up with Revita. I looked at Ernie Fidako, at his wide pink face with the cold eyes deep in the fat, at the pink scalp showing through the blond hair; and wearily I sat up. A gun appeared in the hand of the thin, nervous-faced guy. I assumed he was Max. Ernie Fidako waved an impatient hand at Revita Rosales.

"Make that damn dame look alive."

"Sure." Big Sam took hold of her hair and turned her head so hard she was whipped around and the chair rocked on its legs. She screamed. She screamed for help, and she hit it like an opera singer taking high C.

Big Sam laughed and slapped her, whipping her head around to the other side, and she left it there, the hair half hiding her face; and she stopped screaming. I could see now that we were in a cellar with concrete floor and walls and no windows. Air sighed from a ventilator grating in the ceiling. They weren't worried about her screams being heard.

"That's better." Fidako put a slim, tan cigar in his mouth and the Mexican guy lit it for him. "Now

where's my sixty thousand bucks?"

Revita told him a lot of things: what he was, where he could go, and what he could do when he got there — and it's a pity they weren't in English. She spat at him but he was too far away. Fidako said:

"What's she saying?"

The Mexican said, "She say no dice."

I said to Revita, "I'm sorry, kid."

"It isn't your fault."

It was, though. I should have figured that tapped wire. I should have told her about her husband two weeks ago. Now I said:

"Where is the money?"

"In a safe place."

"Better give it to him."

"Why? He'll kill us anyway."

Which was right. He couldn't take a chance on us going to the law with what we knew about his wetback racket and her husband's death. Maybe he could beat the raps, but he wouldn't chance it. Not when he didn't have to. She was right. Prognosis negative for the both of us.

The Mexican had translated while we talked, and now Ernie Fidako jerked his chin at Big Sam who said:

"Aw, I think she'll talk." He struck a match with his thumbnail, and his swollen lips made a grin. "How about it, tamale? Where's the dough?"

She spat in his face, and this time she didn't miss. Big Sam slapped her hard enough to rock the chair again on its legs; and her head stayed to one side, again half covered by her

hair. Big Sam struck another match.

"Heads up, tamale."

She didn't move. Big Sam shoved the flame into her hair, and a lick of fire went up it. Big Sam batted it out, as Revita's head jerked up in horror. Big Sam laughed.

"A little fire. That makes canaries of them all, doesn't it, tamale?"

He wasn't really laughing. His face had a strained, anticipatory look, and the grin had cracked his ruined lips so that a dribble of blood was working down his chin. The same look was in the faces of the others, too. All except Max. Max's eyes, above the gun, never wavered from me.

I didn't have any hope now. The end was inevitable. But you have to go on trying:

"Just for the record, Ernie. Who killed her husband?"

"Shut up."

"I want to know."

"What's it to you?"

I looked at Cannon. "My guess is you, Sam."

It was a bull's-eye. Sam's grin thinned to nothing at all, and he said: "Why don't we take care of this guy first? He don't know where the dough is. He's just in the way."

My heart jumped uncontrollably, but not because of what Big Sam said. An idea had streaked through my head, as quick as that. Not much of an idea. Maybe no idea at all. I spoke fast, in Spanish, to Revita:

"Was there a fight when they picked you up?"

"No," she whispered back.

The Mexican translated it, and it didn't seem to mean anything to them. Maybe it wouldn't mean anything to anybody. Time was running out fast. I looked at the four of them, I ran my tongue in a slow circle of my lips, then I said in a voice I made shaky:

"Is it all right if I stand up?"

"What for?"

"I feel stiff as hell."

Fidako's eyes narrowed, but I didn't wait for him to think it out. Like he'd said yes, I got to my knees, moving slowly, unsteadily, a suffocating feeling in my chest, expecting any second to hear the guns slam.

I put a hand on Revita's knee to help me stand; then my hand slipped swiftly under her dress, along the silky smoothness of her thigh — *and it was there!*

The dagger.

It was there inside her garter, and now I had it. I whirled, rising with it in my hand. Big Sam barely had time to claw his gun out; then the knife went in just below his wish-bone, angling up to the left; and I must have hit his heart dead center, because I could see the death in his eyes even before he started to fall.

A gun, not Sam's, slammed like the crack of doom, and I felt a stunning shock in my shoulder; but it didn't stop me. I hadn't planned a thing beyond the knife; after that it was as though I did everything by instinct.

It was instinct that made me fall

backwards, pulling Sam over on top of me. Instinct made me grab for his gun. And everything seemed to move so slowly — I seemed to float to the floor, and Big Sam's body seemed to drift down on top of me. It was like I had an enormous amount of time — an infinity of it.

My hand caught Big Sam's gun from his loosened fingers. I remembered to kick Revita's chair so she toppled to the floor out of harm's way, and I felt two bullets from Max's gun sock into Big Sam's body over me.

Then I lined up the sights on Max, and saw the little hole appear magically in his forehead. I hit the other guy, the Mexican, in the side when he tried to duck behind a chair, and I hit him again in the chest when he turned to fire at me, and this time he went over on his back and stayed there. Ernie Fidako was running for the door in a waddly, fat-man's rush, and I put the last three bullets into his broad back.

I pulled the trigger at least three times more on empty chambers before I realized the whole thing was over.

I pushed Big Sam off me.

My shoulder was numb, but it didn't hurt. I felt fine. I realized I was laughing, and the crazy sound of it made me stop.

Revita's wide eyes watched me from where she lay on the floor. "*Muy bravo*" — her whisper barely bridged the distance — "*un hombre muy bravo.*"

I smiled at her. A helluva lot she knew.

"Priest . . ." a bubbly voice came from the door. Ernie Fidako, no kidding. He took a lot of killing, that fat boy. "Get me . . . priest . . ."

I got him a priest. I got him a priest and three newspaper reporters, and by the time he got done talking and died, I was in the clear and so was Revita Rosales.

And late that night with the sleep not coming, and the shoulder hurting, and old prognosis negative

sitting on the foot of my bed, I was still rolling it around in my mind — the *muy bravo* part, which means very brave in Spanish. ' .

Maybe I hadn't been so brave — not the way she thought — but I hadn't been afraid either, and I wasn't now. Not even of what was sitting on the foot of my bed, because it seemed to me that between us we'd thrown a pretty good party this evening.

Me and my *muy bravo* pal, prognosis negative.



Against THE Middle

BY RICHARD MARSTEN



There's one sure way to beat your competition and get the girl. Just put a bullet through your rival's brain.

HE WAS there when I arrived. He was always there lately. Every time I stopped in to see Deidre, he'd be sitting there like a damn big shot, wearing his best suit, his hair neatly combed, his shoes highly polished.

"Hello," he said, and he didn't mask the antagonism in his voice.

I looked at Deidre. My blood began hammering in my veins, the way it did every time I looked at her. "You started to take in boarders?" I asked her.

She tilted her head back, her auburn hair spilling free like an up-turned glass of burgundy. Her lips

parted, full and scarlet, and a laugh rippled up the clean, long line of her throat, bubbled out of her lips.

"You're a fool, Gene," she said. "A simple, jealous fool!"

"Damn right I am," I said.

She rose quickly, her thighs flashing as she shoved herself off the couch. She sucked in a deep breath, and her breasts punched out against the shimmering green silk of her blouse. "And you are too, Charlie," she said, turning to him.

He tried to grin. "Deidre, I . . ."

"Oh, shut up! Just shut up! I'm sick of both of you whining around me like a pair of lovesick puppies."

"That's unfair, Deidre," I said.

"There are other men, you know," she went on. "Plenty of other men. I don't have to sit around here and listen to you two argue."

Charlie's heart was showing all over his face when he got up. "Honey, there's no need to get angry."

"Take me out," she said, her eyes flashing. "Take me out and give me a good time. Both of you! Show me you're interested! Instead of arguing, show me."

"I . . . I thought *we* had a date tonight," I said lamely.

"What?" Charlie complained. "Deidre, you said you'd go out with *me*."

"If you're going to start again, you can both get the hell out," she said. She stared at us in heated silence. "Well, make up your minds."

I looked at Charlie, and he stared back maliciously.

"All right," I said at last, and Charlie nodded agreement.

"You're dolls," Deidre said, smiling. "Wait while I dress."

That's the way it went.

Charlie clung to her like a dirty shirt. If I called and the phone was busy, I knew she was talking to Charlie. If I went to see her and found flowers on the hall table, I knew Charlie had sent them. I began buying her things, things I couldn't afford, but I knew Charlie was doing the same thing. Charlie,

always Charlie! I began to hate him with a fierce intensity. And all the while, the fever that was Deidre grew inside me. I would think of her all the time, think of the silken flow of her hair, the rich swell of her breasts, the lissom walk, the flat stomach and rounded hips. I wanted her more than I'd ever wanted anything in my life. But I knew that Charlie wanted her, too. I began to wish that Charlie was dead.

And then I began to plan a way of making sure he'd be dead.

The .45 was heavy in my pocket. I'd checked the clip a dozen times, sliding it in and out of the automatic. Seven slugs. With luck, I'd only need one, two at the most. I walked over to the phone, rehearsing Charlie's number in my mind. I was reaching down to pick it up when it rang.

The sound startled me, and I jerked my hand back and stared at the black instrument. It rang again, and then a third time, and I suddenly realized that it might be Deidre calling. The old fire roared through my blood again, and I lifted the phone with a trembling hand.

"Hello."

"Gene?"

"Yes?"

"This is Charlie."

"What the hell do *you* want?"

I was sorry I'd said that as soon as it was out. I should have been sweet-

talking him. I should have been setting him up for the bullet I would put through his brain.

"Now that's no attitude to take, Gene." His voice was soft.

"I guess not, Charlie," I said. "As a matter of fact, I was about to call you."

"I'd like to talk to you, Gene." He paused. "About . . . Deidre."

The name hung between us like a burning torch for several minutes. He was playing right into my hands, setting the thing up without my having to lift a finger.

"All right," I said, finally.

"Tonight," he said.

"Sure. Where?"

"Do you know the big fountain in the park?"

"Yes." My heart was beginning to beat wildly. That would be the perfect spot. Dark, with very few passersby. And there had been enough muggings and rapes there lately to make this look like just more of the hoodlums' work.

"I'll see you there, Gene. At about . . . ten o'clock too late?"

"No, no, that's fine."

"All right. I'll see you."

"Ten o'clock," I repeated. Then I hung up.

I waited by the fountain. I was there at nine-thirty, just to be sure. There was a faint sliver of a moon in the sky, a mugger's moon that cast hardly any light on the stone fountain. I gripped the .45 in my pocket with a sweating hand, thinking that

soon it would all be over. Soon, Deidre would be mine. There'd be no Charlie. Just me.

I began to weave a sensuous fantasy, a fantasy in which Deidre came into my arms naked, her lips wide and moist, her eyes half-closed. I thought of the sapphire necklace I had given her, the necklace that had cost me almost every penny I had. I thought of it against her white, warm flesh, dangling between the swell of her breasts. I thought of her sullen mouth against mine. No Charlie. Deidre and me.

She wouldn't complain about my lack of attention then. She wouldn't complain that anyone was bringing her more gifts than I was. A frown puckered my forehead. After the necklace, I hadn't brought her anything for a long time. She hadn't liked that. She hadn't liked it at all. Because Charlie had been bringing her stuff! Always Charlie! Always Charlie!

I heard footsteps, and I ducked into the shadows of the fountain. The footsteps came quickly, clicking against the asphalt walk, hurrying toward the fountain. I glanced at my watch. Nine forty-five. Charlie was early. Early for his own funeral.

The footsteps stopped, and then began clicking forward slowly on the walk. I released the safety on the .45, and eased it out of my pocket. It was slippery in my hand, and panic gripped me as it almost dropped to the walk. I calmed myself and waited, listening to the

footsteps come up on the other side of the fountain. I wet my lips and listened.

The footsteps stopped.

He was waiting on the other side of the fountain. I could walk around and give it to him before he knew what hit him. I swallowed hard and put the gun down against my leg, where he wouldn't be able to see it.

"Charlie?" I whispered.

There was a startled gasp from the other side of the fountain. Then a voice asked, "Gene?"

"Yes," I whispered. I took a step forward, the .45 heavy in my hand. "You're early, Charlie."

"You are, too." His voice was closer this time, still a hushed whisper.

I saw the gun he was holding, and panic fluttered into my throat. He must have seen the .45 at about the same time because he backed away a pace. I saw that he was holding a gun, too, a war souvenir like mine.

In the dull gleam of the moonlight, we stood facing each other like two primeval beasts ready to do battle. We didn't say a word. We just stared at each other, comprehension and realization seeping into our minds.

Slowly, I lowered my gun — and I saw Charlie lower his, too.

We sat down, then, and we talked for a long time.

She was dressed like a queen. My sapphire necklace captured light, held it in a glistening blue aura

around her neck. She was wearing Charlie's watch on her wrist, his cocktail ring on her pinky. The earrings dangling from her ears were another of my gifts.

And there were jewels I didn't recognize, jewels I knew Charlie hadn't given her, either. She wore them all at once, like a miser displaying his wealth, and we knew there had been many other men before us, and that there would be a long line after we were gone.

We watched her silently, wondering how many others had been driven close to murder, wondering where they all were now, wondering what became of them after they outlived their usefulness to Deidre. She stood like a Christmas tree, the jewels gleaming brightly.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" she asked. Her eyes glistened the way the jewels did.

"Very pretty," I said. "But I thought we'd just take a walk tonight."

She pouted for a moment, and then shrugged. Slowly, carefully, she began taking off the jewels, laying them lovingly in the case on her dresser. "Just a walk?"

"Well, maybe we'll go some place later on," I said.

"I'm kind of tired," Charlie said. "I think I'll head for home."

"Oh?" A perplexed frown crossed her brow, and then an annoyed tone came into her voice. "Well, all right. Come on, Gene, let's go."

We walked down the steps,

Deidre in the middle. When we reached the street, she said, "Well, good night, Charlie."

"Oh, I'll walk with you a little way," he said. "If you're going my way."

"Where do you want to walk, Gene?" she asked.

"The park, I thought. It's such a nice night."

"The park? With all the muggings and shootings and everything there?" She pouted. Her eyes were

opened wide, her lashes fluttering.

"The reports are exaggerated," I said. "Besides, we'll only walk for a little while."

Deidre laughed her tinkling little laugh, and Charlie and I watched silently. "All right," she said. "It sounds exciting." She took my arm, and I clutched the heavy automatic in my pocket and looked at Charlie.

Charlie smiled, his eyes answering mine. "I'll walk with you as far as the fountain," he said.



WAITING FOR VETTER

Renzo started to get up then. Slowly, a ponderous monster with hands spread apart to kill something. "You two did it. You damn near ruined me. You know what happens now?" He licked his lips and the muscles rolled under his shirt.

My face was changing shape and I nodded. Renzo never noticed. Helen saw it. I said, "A lot happens now, fat boy." I dropped the package on the floor and kicked it to one side. Renzo moved out from behind the desk. He wasn't thinking any more. He was just seeing me and thinking of his empire that had almost toppled. The package could set it up again. I said, "Listen, you can hear it happen."

Then he stopped to think. He turned his head and you could hear the whine of engines, and the shots coming clear across the night through the rain. There was a frenzy about the way it was happening, the frenzy and madness that go into a banzai charge and above it the moan of sirens that seemed to go ignored.

They're all waiting for Vetter in this payoff scene from the last installment of Mickey Spillane's *Everybody's Watching Me*, leading off our big April issue. And there's a brand new lineup of stories we've all been waiting for, and everybody will be watching for.

Henry Kane has written a bang-up novelette titled *One Little Bullet*, featuring the same Peter Chambers who romped through *Armchair In Hell*, *Halo For Nobody*, *Edge Of Panic*, *Hang By Your Neck*, and *Until You Are Dead*.

Robert Patrick Wilmot, who gives you a sample of his stuff with *Triple Cross* in this issue, comes up with a longer story titled *The G-Notes*, and it's a novelette that packs a powerful wallop.

In the same issue, there's a story by David Goodis, author of the novels *Dark Passage*, *Nightfall*, and *Behold This Woman*. His new story is a shocker that will keep you guessing all the way.

Richard Ellington, who wrote *Stone Cold Dead*, *Just Killing Time*, and *Exit For A Dame*, is in the April issue, too. He's thrown Steve Drake into a mixup of murder and mayhem titled *Fan Club* — a title which should prove prophetic.

Richard Deming and Evan Hunter — neither of whom are strangers to *Manhunt* — have written two stories respectively titled *Mugger Murder* and *Kid Kill*. They're the most unusual yarns we've seen in a long time, and we think you'll agree after reading them and the editors' comments following the tales. And there's Kris Neville with a story titled *Big Talk*, and Robert Turner, and more.

It's a brim-full issue for April!

Join us, won't you?

MUGGED AND PRINTED

MICKEY SPILLANE'S books have sold more than 20,000,000 copies in all editions, and the



tide is still rolling. Though *Everybody's Watching Me* is still running in this magazine, his agent has already received three movie offers for it. The Hollywood boys, incidentally, all ask the same question *you're* probably asking: who *is* this tough Vetter, anyway?

LESLIE CHARTERIS, creator of *The Saint*, describes himself: "Dark brown hair and eyes. 6 ft. 4 inches. Visible peculiarity: monocle, miraculously retained in eye. Have been knifed in low brawls in Paris and Marseilles—each time hurt the knifer more than he hurt me. First novel, *Esquire*, written and accepted at 19 just before chucking Cambridge. God Save the King."



CRAIG RICE is on hand with a new John J. Malone story and a strange, shocking ending.

A former police reporter and press agent, her books include *Having Wonderful Crime*, *Home Sweet Homicide*, *The Fourth Postman*, and *Trial By Fury*. The little criminal lawyer also appears in a television series.



BRUNO FISCHER, whose novels, *The Paper Circle*, *The Silent Dust*, *The Restless Hands*, and



others, were written during his rigid nine-to-five working schedule, lives alongside the Hudson River in up-state New York. He says he can't think of a more pleasant way of making a living. His fiction is always tough and outstanding.

HAROLD Q. MASUR, a successful lawyer until he decided he'd rather present case histories in stories than in court, offers *The Mourning After*, a Scott Jordan story. Some of Masur's top-notch Scott Jordan novels include *Bury Me Deep*, *Suddenly A Corpse*, and *You Can't Live Forever*. His most recent book, an Inner Sanctum Mystery, is *So Rich, So Lovely, And So Dead*.



ROBERT PATRICK WILMOT, whose *Triple-Cross* marks his first appearance in *Manhunt*,

caused a sensation with his first novel, *Blood In Your Eye*. The *New York Times* labelled him one of the best mystery writers to come along since Raymond Chandler. You'll understand the *Times'* enthusiasm when you've read his exciting story, *Triple-Cross*.



WILLIAM LINDSAY GRESHAM is perhaps best known for his novel, *Nightmare Alley*, which Twentieth Century-Fox brought to the screen. His stories are always tough and realistic; witness, *Teaser*. ♦ RICHARD S. PRATHER, FRANK KANE, and EVAN HUNTER, no strangers to *Manhunt*, are back with stories featuring characters made famous in their many books. Prather, author of *Bodies In Bedlam*, *Way of a Wanton*, and many others, leads off this issue with a new Shell Scott novelette; Kane, who's written *Slay Ride*, *Bare Trap*, *Green Light for Death*, etc., has a new story, *Payoff*; and Hunter, author of *The Big Fix* and others, is back with *Dead Men Don't Dream*.